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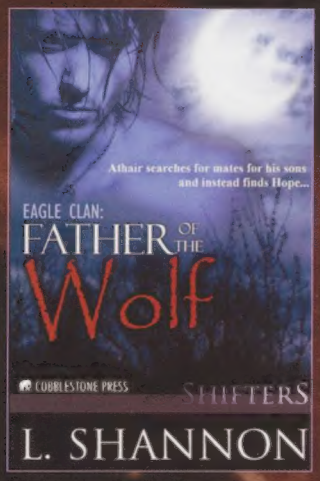

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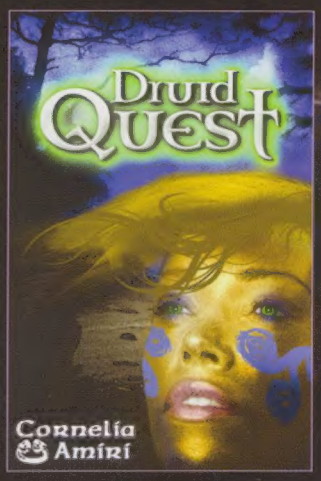

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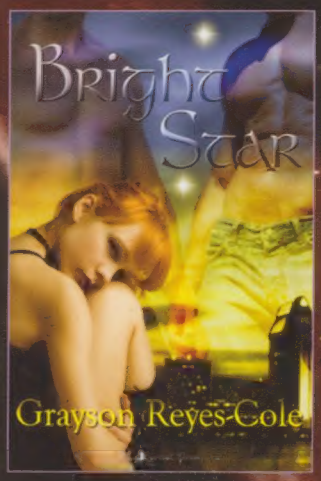

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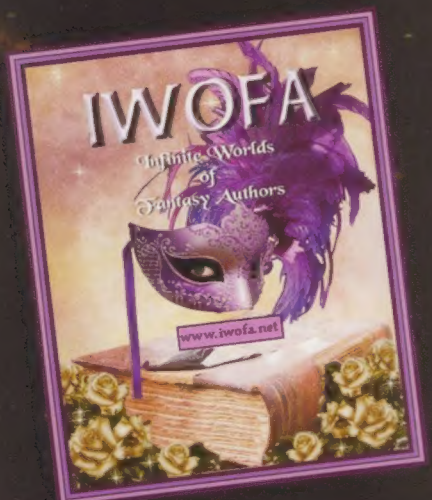

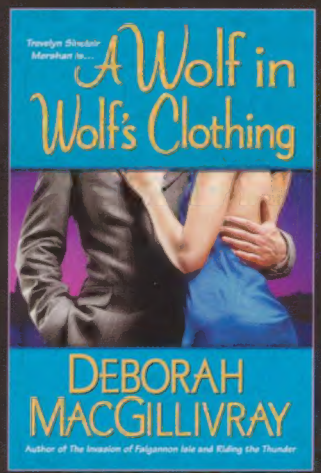

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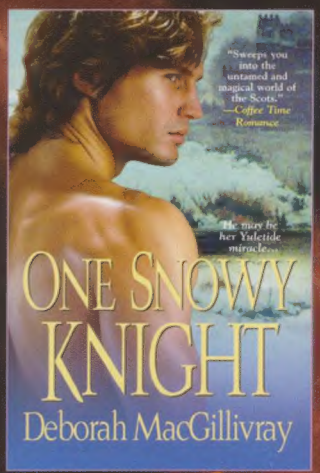
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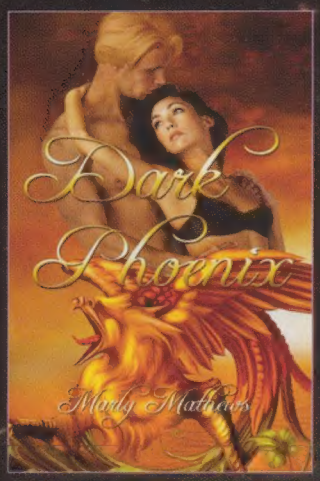

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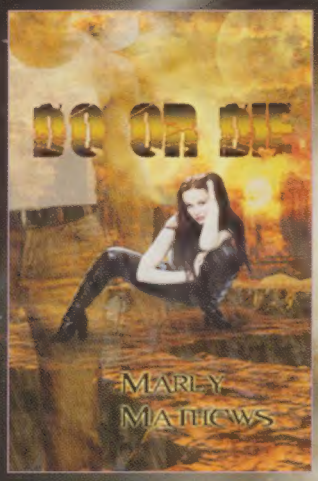

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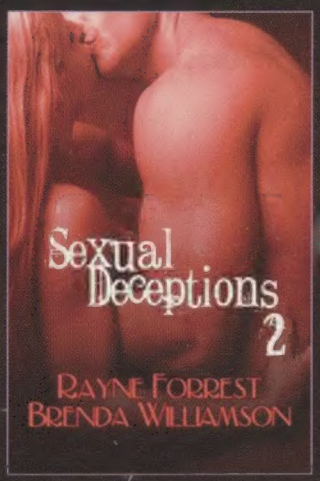

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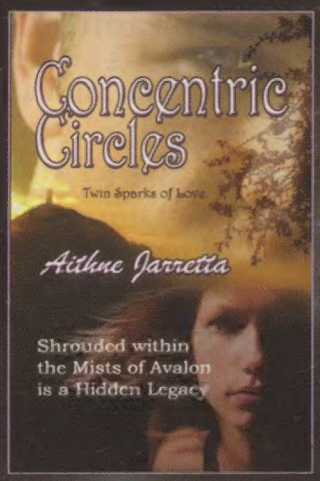

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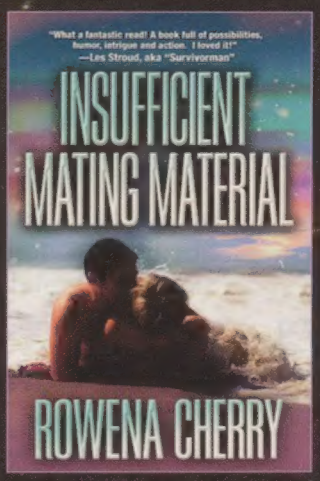
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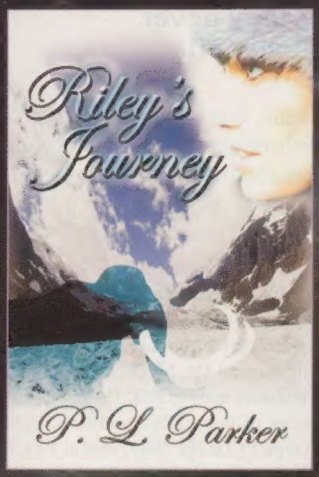

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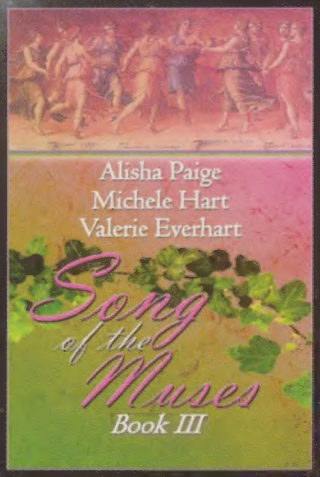

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August 2009

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ABOVE: is the incomparable Michael Hague. Turn to page 66 to see more of his amazing work and visit his website at http://michaelhague.com/. COVER: Mermaid by British artist Dominic Harman . You can see more of his artwork at http://www.dominic-harman.com/

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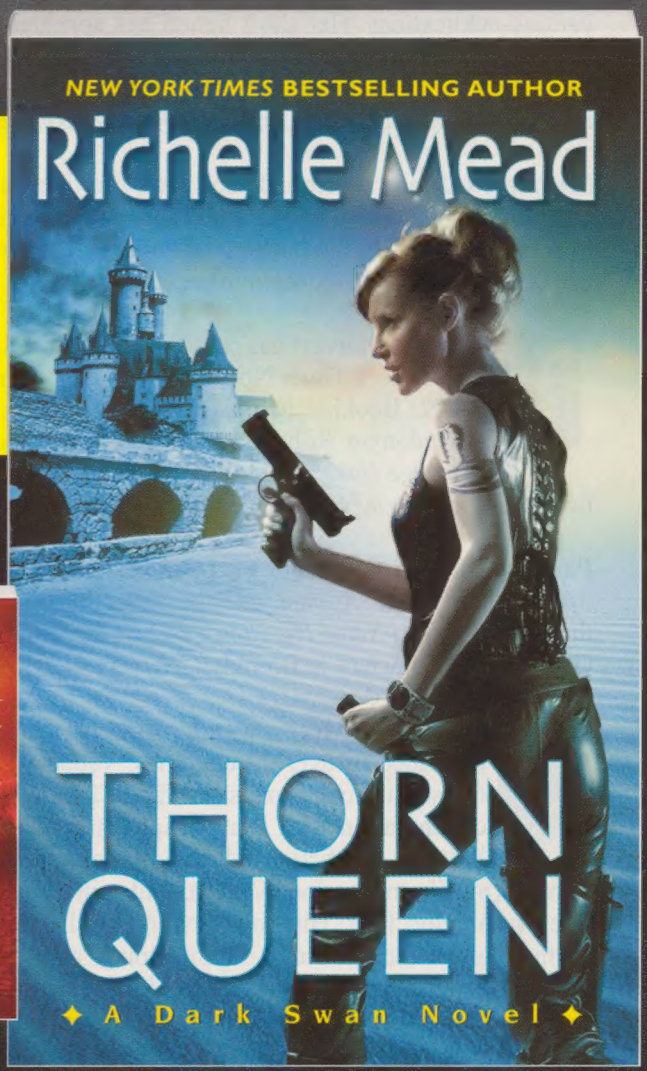

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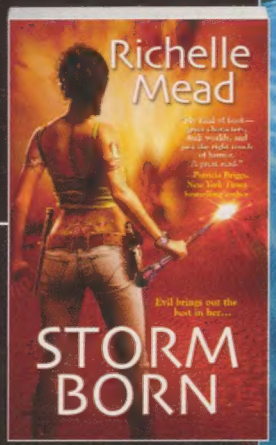

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Resa Nelson has been the TV/Movie columnist for *Realms of Fantasy* magazine since 1999. She is a SFWA member and a Clarion graduate. Her first novel, *The Dragonslayer's Sword* (published by Mundania Press), was a Finalist for the 2009 EPPIE Award for Best Fantasy Novel and is the first novel in her Dragonslayer series. Her next novel is a standalone novel: *Our Lady of the Absolute* is scheduled for publication in mid-2010. Nelson's short fiction has been published in *Science Fiction Age*, *Fantasy*, *MZB's Sword and Sorceress XXIII*, and other magazines and anthologies. Visit her website and blog at www.resanelson.com.

Matt Staggs is *Realms of Fantasy*'s games reviewer and also a regular contributor of fiction reviews. When he's not reading, writing or gaming, Matt enjoys spending time with his wife and surfing the web. If you'd like to send Matt a book or game for review, contact him at mattormeg@gmail.com.

Karen Haber has written nine novels including *Star Trek Voyager: Bless the Beasts*, and is co-author of *Science of the X-Men*. A Hugo-nominee for *Meditations on Middle Earth*, she reviews art books for *Locus Magazine* and profiles artists for various publications. Her short fiction has appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and many anthologies. Her recent work includes *Crossing Infinity*, an sf novel about gender identity. Email: karenhaber@yahoo.com, http://www.geocities.com/karenhaber/

Michael M. Jones, writer and book reviewer, lives in Roanoke, VA, with a herd of cats, a vast mountain of books, and a very patient wife. He's sworn not to die until he's finished reading his backlog of books. His ever-growing archive of reviews can be found at www.michaelmjones.com.

Dennis Danvers has published seven novels, including *Circuit of Heaven* (New York Times Notable, 1998), *The Watch* (New York Times Notable, 2002; Booklist 10 Best SF novels, 2002), and *The Bright Spot* (under pseudonym Robert Sydney). Recent short fiction include stories in *Strange Horizons* and *Intergalactic Medicine Show*. He teaches science fiction and fantasy at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia.

Paul Witcover is the author of the novels *Waking Beauty*, *Tumbling After*, and *Dracula: Asylum*, and the collection *Everland*. He is also the author of *Zora Neale Hurston*, a biography. He lives on the edge of Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York.

Jeff VanderMeer is a multiple-award winning fantasy author with books published in over 20 countries. VanderMeer has collaborated on short films with rock groups like The Church, is in the preliminary stages of collaboration with Ben Templesmith, co-creator of 30 Days of Night, has had his fiction adapted for promotional purposes by Playstation Europe (by filmmaker Joel Veitch), and writes for the Amazon book blog and The Washington Post. His online nonfiction has been name-checked frequently by the likes of the LA Times, Boing Boing, and many more. With his wife Ann VanderMeer, the fiction editor for *Weird Tales*, he is the co-editor of *Best American Fantasy, Fast Ships, Black Sails* (pirates), *Steampunk*, *New Weird*, and many more. Together, they have taught writing workshops and given lectures all over the world. This literary "power couple" (Boing Boing) has been profiled on Wired.com, NYT blog, and on national NPR.

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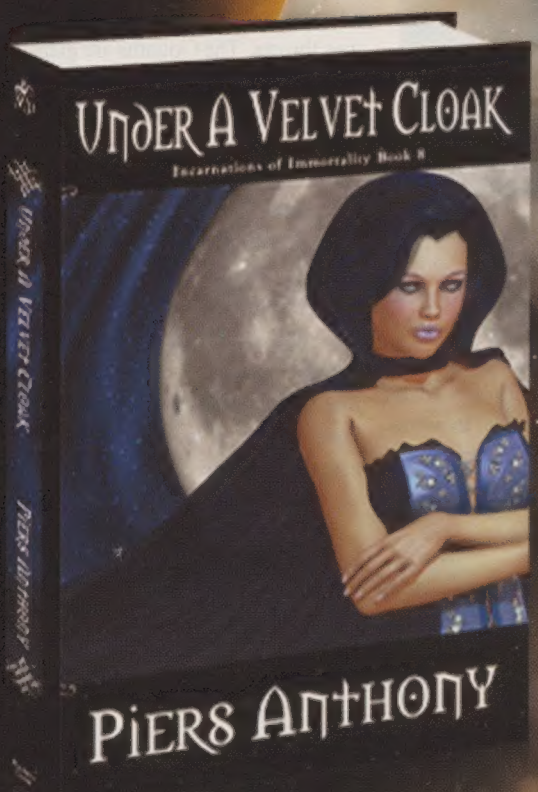

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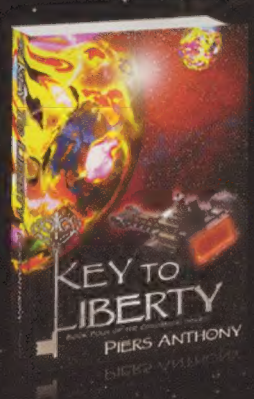

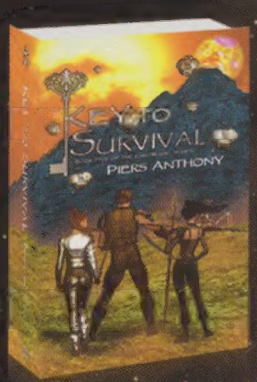

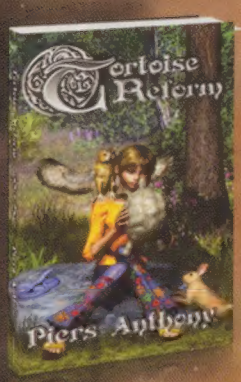

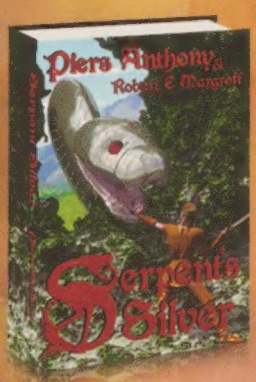

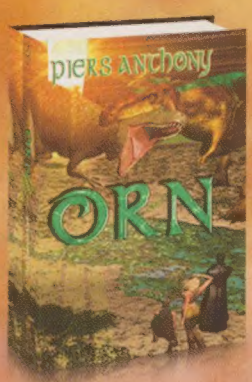

Other books by Piers Anthony

Games

Matt Staggs

The fourth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, the world's best-known fantasy role-playing game, has only been on the market for a year, but already players and Dungeon Masters alike have their pick of a large selection of sourcebooks that expand game play options and better enable groups to customize their adventures to their liking. The *Player's Handbook 2* and *Arcane Power* sourcebook are two recent additions to this rapidly expanding line from Wizards of the Coast.

Player's Handbook 2, A Sourcebook for the 4th edition of Dungeons & Dragons, Wizards of the Coast, 224 pp., hardcover, $34.95

The Player's Handbook 2 brings five new races and eight new classes to the table, including a handful of both that were originally available in the last edition's *Player's Handbook*. Longtime players will be pleased to see that both the Gnome and Half-Orc are back among the stable of playable races. The *Player's Handbook 2* eschews the prior edition's conception of the Gnome as technician and alchemist, and instead recasts the race as crafty, fey illusionists and tricksters. This Gnome has far more in common with the race introduced in *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* than it does with any of its latter incarnations. Players who enjoy using stealth and misdirection to accomplish their goals will find this new Gnome very much to their liking; the race can utilize the Wizard cantrip "Ghost Sound" at will, as well as temporarily vanish in response to danger. The Half-Orc has also been revised for the new edition in some very minor ways. The brutal implications of the Half-Orc's origins have always made some players uncomfortable. The fourth edition makes no definitive claims regarding the race, instead offering several more palatable theories, including the possibility that Half-Orcs might be the product of divine intervention or arcane experimentation. Otherwise, the race remains as it has been in every edition: quick to anger, brutish and reliant on sheer might and rage to make its way in the world. Some might say that this is just as the Half-Orc should be.

The book also introduces three new races: the Deva, Goliath and Shifter. The Deva are a race of reincarnated spirits who take on fleshly forms to better fight evil. Deva characters can draw upon the wisdom of their countless incarnations to aid them in times of trouble, gaining bonuses to skill checks, attack rolls and savings throws. The Goliaths are giant, mountain-dwelling beings who dwarf the other races in both size and endurance. Their rock-like skin provides natural armor, making them formidable opponents. The Shifters are lycanthropic humanoids who can manifest sharp claws, fangs and other bestial traits in combat, making them a great option for those who have always wanted to play a werewolf. Also introduced is the concept of Racial Paragon paths, allowing players to access even greater racial powers in lieu of following the normal class-associated Paragon paths. In all aspects, they function exactly as those associated with class; there

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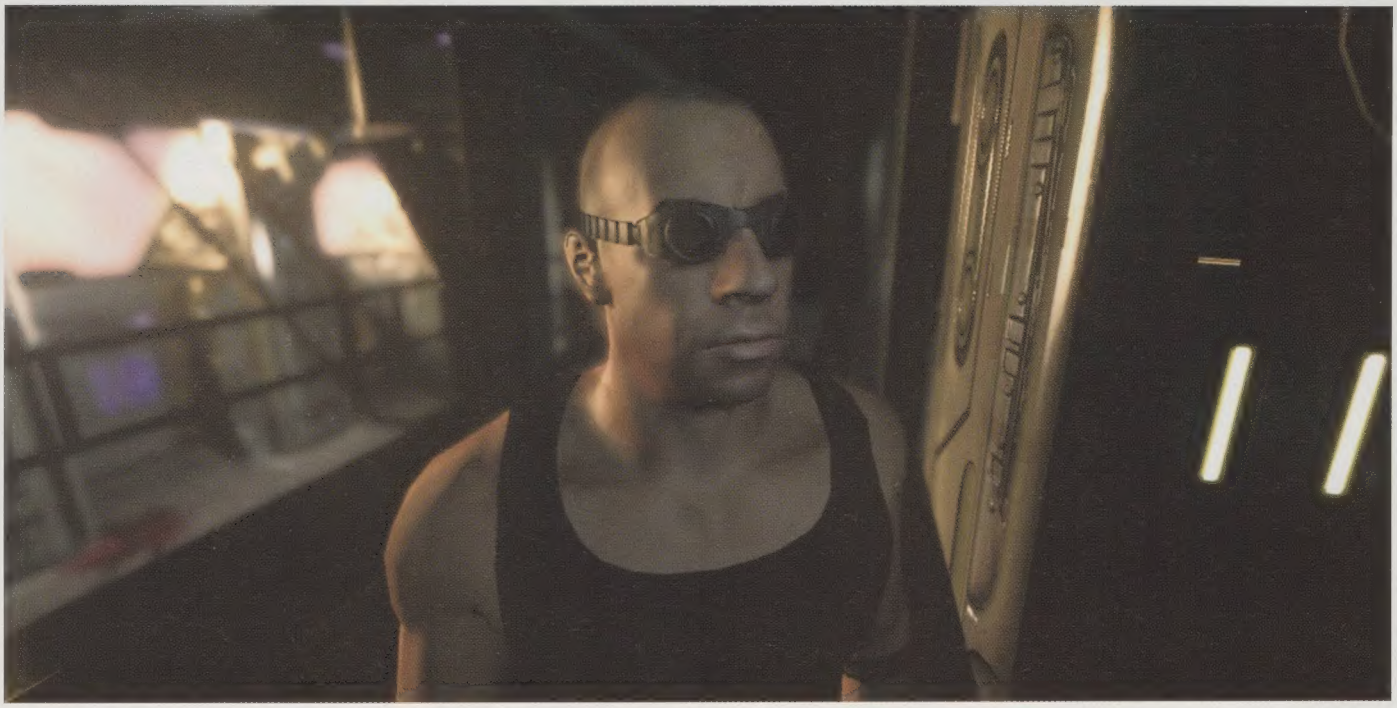

is one Racial Paragon path featured for each race in both *Player's Handbooks*. The *Player's Handbook 2* also introduces several new classes, the majority of which draw from "Primal" power sources – the spirits of nature - for their abilities. Much as in the case of the Gnome and Half-Orc, these new classes include several that were originally part of the last edition's core rules: the Barbarian, Bard, Druid and Sorcerer. Barbarians are warriors from uncivilized cultures who use their fierce rage to overpower and defeat their enemies. The Bard is a master of song and jest, able to seriously hinder enemies and aid allies with magical songs and verse. Druids are savage defenders of the wild world, with the ability to assume animal shape and manifest nature-based attacks against those who would defile the wilderness. The Sorcerer is a wielder of wild magic that, while powerful, can be unpredictable and dangerous. None of these classes deviate very far from their original incarnations, and will be immediately familiar to players of previous editions. Entirely new classes include the Invoker, which embodies the powers of his or her chosen deity; the Avenger, a class of holy warriors who mete out the punishments of their gods upon their enemies; the Shaman, who communes with nature spirits; and the Warden, who defends the living earth against unnatural and corrupting influences like Demons. In addition to the options of new races and classes, the *Player's Handbook 2* offers optional background packages which confer different advantages based on choices taken at character creation. This is useful not only for the player eager for tips on how to role-play his or her character, but also the harried Dungeon Master looking for story hooks. The *Player's Handbook 2* also includes 62 new Heroic feats, 39 Paragon feats, 23 Epic feats and eight feats just for multi-class characters. These feats include options for characters from both *Player's Handbooks*, so players will want to pick this book up for these at the very least. The final section of the book includes several pages of new magical weapons, armor and other items. The *Player's Handbook 2* is absolutely crammed with content, and deserves a place at any gaming table. As with any sourcebook, not all of the material will be a perfect fit for everyone's game, but with so much of it, it's a guarantee that at least some of it will be.

The Chronicles of Riddick: Assault on Dark Athena, Atari, Xbox 360, Playstation 3, PC. (Xbox 360 format reviewed

It's practically a given that video games based on movies rarely live up to the hype, so when one comes along that defies that expectation it's a significant and rare event. Such was the case with *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay*, released in 2004 as a tie-in to the film *The Chronicles of Riddick*, itself a sequel to the 2000 cult film *Pitch Black*. While the film itself met mixed reactions from fans, Escape from Butcher Bay was a surprise hit among gamers, who enjoyed its mix of innovative stealth action and bloody melee. Flash forward five years later to 2009, and once again a new Riddick video game is wowing critics and gamers alike. *The Chronicles of Riddick: Assault on Dark Athena* takes place immediately following the events depicted in *Escape from Butcher Bay*, which, if you're keeping score, takes place before the events of *Pitch Black* and *The Chronicles of Riddick*. Vin Diesel again lends his voice and image to the role that made him famous: the goggles-wearing, knife toting, black-clad sociopathic killer Richard B. Riddick. After escaping Butcher Bay, Riddick and Johns' ship is captured by the *Dark Athena*, an enormous spacecraft under the control of a group of bloodthirsty mercenaries. The crew succeeds in removing Johns from his cryogenic storage and transports him to a nearby cell. However, Riddick manages to awaken in time and slip away into the shadows. From this moment on, the player assumes control of Riddick: a powerful character whose various abilities take time and finesse to master. *Assault on Dark Athena* is played in the first-person perspective, and the player must use a combination of stealth and carefully chosen battles to effect an escape. The game makes use of a dynamic stealth mechanic that allows Riddick to slip undetected from shadow to shadow. Whenever Riddick is invisible to an enemy, the screen acquires a blue tint, and when an enemy is near the player is cued by the sounds of a heartbeat. Relying on both of these clues, Riddick can approach a target from behind and quietly kill him without alerting others. In some cases, Riddick can even slip past an enemy and avoid combat altogether. How

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ever, when combat becomes necessary *Assault on Dark Athena* really shines. For most of the game Riddick only has access to clubs, knives and his signature "Ulak" blades. However, anyone who has seen the films knows that for a guy like Riddick, this is more than enough. Combat incorporates combination strikes and whenever one of these is successfully used, it triggers one of dozens of gorgeously rendered but exceedingly brutal kill animations. As rewarding as these are, Riddick is far from invulnerable, and going against more than a couple of enemies at any time is a sure way to die fast. The element of surprise is almost always an essential component for a successful attack. While firearm combat isn't nearly as visually stunning, the game's designers implemented an intuitive cover system: when Riddick is crouched behind an obstacle he automatically positions the gun in a way that makes it possible to fire while minimizing his own exposure. Although most of the time this works without a hitch, there are a couple of instances where the AI gets confused if Riddick is hiding behind a wire grate or fence. Firearms and guns aren't Riddick's only means of assaulting his enemies. During one stage of the game he pilots an armored mech and during another gains access to a group of remote-controlled drone soldiers. These drones are Riddick's rank-and-file antagonists while on Dark Athena. They're essentially reanimated corpses fitted with life-sustaining respirators and armed with rifles built directly into their arms. Being forced to crouch in the darkness and listen for the tell-

tale sounds of their shuffling steps and the rhythmic gasp of their respirators can result in some genuinely creepy moments during game play. In addition to the drones, Riddick is challenged by a wide variety of Merc soldiers, most of which are armed with guns at times when Riddick may not be. While the majority of this review has focused on the action and stealth aspects of *Assault on Dark Athena*, special praise must be given for the quality of the voice acting. Vin Diesel is supported by a talented cast that breathes life into every cut scene, including genre veteran Lance Henriksen. One criticism leveled at *Escape from Butcher Bay* was the lack of a multiplayer mode. *Assault on Dark Athena* addresses this with mixed success. Although the game does feature all of the standard multiplayer modes, only one, "Pitch Black," is worth playing. That being said, it's really a lot of fun. In "Pitch Black" mode, one player is selected to be Riddick with the other players in the role of Mercs hunting him through a maze of dark corridors. The Merc players have only their weapon-mounted flashlights with which to see, and the light is weaker for more powerful weapons. Riddick hunts the Mercs until one manages to take him down, at which time

that player assumes the role of Riddick. *Assault on Dark Athena* would be well worth the price of admission on its own, but it also comes bundled with a remastered version of *Escape from Butcher Bay*, great for those players who missed it the first time around. While Riddick's future in the movies may be questionable (although there are rumors of a third film in the works), quality game titles like *Assault on Dark Athena* show that there will probably continue to be a place for him on the small screen, at least.

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Scion Companion, A Sourcebook for Scion, White Wolf Publishing, hardcover, 248 pp., $31.99

The *Scion Companion* initially began as a series of singly released e-books, each detailing one of six stand-alone expansions for White Wolf's popular *Scion* game system. *Scion* is a fantasy role-playing game that enables players to take the role of mighty heroes called Scions, the partly divine sons and daughters of the very gods themselves, and go forth into the modern world to battle against the ancient Titans and their spawn. The core *Scion* book, *Scion: Hero* set the stage through the introduction of six major pantheons drawn from the Greek, Egyptian, Japanese, Nordic, Aztec and Vodoun religions and provided the basic rules of play for hero-level characters, who are beginning scions with the potential to grow into demigods and ultimately gods themselves. All Scions have unique gifts called "boons" that vary depending on the god or goddess from whom they claim their lineage. These boons can take the form of special powers that allow them to exert limited control over elements traditionally within their god's purview (for example, the Scions of war gods have warlike gifts that can help them in combat), or powerful companions and magical items like magic shields or spears. These are called "birthrights". The *Scion: Companion* book expands these ideas and augments material in *Scion: Hero*, *Scion: Demigod* and *Scion: God*. However, only the *Scion: Hero* book is necessary to use the material it contains. *Scion: Companion* introduces three new pantheons: the ancient Irish gods of the Tuatha Dé Dannan, the Chinese Celestial Bureaucracy, and the Devas, or gods of the Hindu faith. All three pantheons receive an enormous amount of attention with page after page filled with background information and game data on the gods, their realms and boons. Credit is due to the authors of *Scion: Companion* for really doing their research: most of the text is mythologically accurate, drawing from real world holy books, sagas and hero tales. The section on the Tuatha Dé Dannan even appropriates Cuchullain, the hero of the famed Irish saga *The Tain* for a minor role in its pantheon. The Celestial Bureaucracy and the Devas entries also display a comparable level of detail. However, in a nod to the fact that Hinduism is still a globe-spanning contemporary religion practiced by millions, the authors note that the game's version of the faith may be altered for dramatic reasons. Each new pantheon is followed by ready-to-play example Scions (always useful for a new player or Storyteller). *Scion: Companion* also explains how a Scion character might be able to transmit some of his or her powers to a loyal companion through the sharing of ichor, or blood, much like the vampire characters of White Wolf's popular *Vampire: the Requiem* game do for their own human followers. Another shared trait from both games is that the followers of Scions or Vampires can become "addicted" to these offerings, and even suffer withdrawal. *Scion* and *Vampire: The Requiem* are considered two separate gaming universes, yet it's similarities like these that bring a level of cohesiveness and ease of play to much of White Wolf's line. Another very useful section of *Scion: Companion* details how and when the various pantheons interact, and provides a wealth of story hooks that Storytellers can use to bring characters of differing backgrounds together for adventure. The gods and goddesses, the book stresses, consider it in their best interests not to engage in open warfare with one another and usually use their Scions and mortal followers for these purposes. Sometimes, though, mortals can push back, as in the case of The Order of Divine Glory, a new antagonist organization described in *Scion: Companion*. The secretive Order is aware of the gods and seeks to weaken and absorb them into a single godhead subject to the dictates of the Order's leaders. The Order works behind the scenes of the world's monotheistic religions and tries to recruit and convert unwary Scions. Perhaps the most impressive section of *Scion: Companion* is devoted to World War II. Beginning with the premise that World War II was caused in part by a war between the pantheons, these rules allow players to run characters in the service of various minor gods, most derived from national folk heroes and archetypes. Using these rules, it is possible to create Scions of John Henry, Uncle Sam and even Johnny Appleseed, all of whom have been roused to action by the terrible events of World War II. Similar minor pantheons are detailed for France and Great Britain. Since war is as much the struggle of nations as it is of the individual soldier, the book ends with some very simple rules on managing mass combat. These rules aren't necessarily tied to World War II and could be used to simulate any large scale conflict. As a sourcebook, *Scion:Companion* isn't absolutely necessary to own, but any group of players looking to sustain a long-term campaign would do well to add it to their library.

Summoners, a sourcebook for Mage: The Awakening, White Wolf Publishing, hardcover, 224 pp., $31.99

Summoners is a new sourcebook for *Mage: The Awakening*, the game of mysticism and modern magic from White Wolf. Mage is part of the World of Darkness horror gaming system, and as such, much of this sourcebook can be used with its companion systems. Like most of White Wolf's products, it is beautifully illustrated. The frightening and evocative pen and ink illustrations work well to realize the otherworldly nature of the subject. *Summoners* is devoted to that most traditional activity of sorcerers: the evocation of otherworldly beings. From Simon Magus to Dr. Faustus, literature and popular culture is filled with the stories of mages calling forth powerful and strange entities, as well as the disastrous consequences that usually follow. *Summoners* enables *Mage*

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characters to do the same, provided they are brave enough to do so. The book begins with an overview of the various spiritual realms, astral, shadow and underworld, respectively, explaining how these relate to the physical world and what sorts of entities make them their homes. Details on the actual realms themselves are sparse: the text explains that such worlds would be incomprehensible to the human mind anyway, and it is far more useful to focus instead on the beings that a powerful mage may call forth from them. The introduction also focuses on the motivations that mages may have to enact the rites of summoning – knowledge, power and revenge – and also the terrible costs that such summonings can incur. In some ways, *Summoners* serves as a sort of cosmic phone book, with sections neatly divided to type of creature summoned, where they may be found and how they can be bound and forced to provide services, goods or information. Such beings vary widely, from ghosts to demons and all parts between. Some are comparable to Platonic ideals and Jungian archetypes; others embody the mage's own subconscious fears and desires. Then there are goblins, angels, incomprehensible cosmic horrors and even cryptids like the Chupacabra and Bigfoot. A particularly devious Storyteller could take his or her pick of these creatures and drop into another *World of Darkness* game like *Vampire: The Requiem* or *Hunter: The Reckoning* to challenge players who think that they already know all there is to know about their game world. The summoning rites included in *Summoners* are considered extremely easy, and this is where things can get dangerous. Players can become too comfortable when summoning "just another ghost", and when this happens the otherworldly beings called forth are apt to take advantage of their inattention. Mismanaged summonings can lead to insanity, damnation and even death. *Summoners* also include rules for establishing pacts with supernatural entities, including both powers granted to, and costs exacted from, the mage. Rules for forfeiture are included as well. Demons and other such beings can inflict powerful penalties upon mere humans who do not live up to their end of the pact. Rounding things up are new spells, artifacts and legacies. Many of these could be used to introduce the rest of the material from *Summoners* to an already established campaign, or to initiate a new game focused on the summoning and binding of otherworldly entities. In addition to these, the book includes six new Paths, each of which offers a different perspective on, and use for, summoning magic. One in particular, "The Legion" is a sect of demon summoners who use their arcane arts to mutilate their flesh, gaining strange powers in the process. Their mission is to make space in this world for their abyssal allies, making them a frightening and powerful enemy for players to battle. Some Storytellers could even take things a step further and choose to use the material in *Summoners* solely for the construction and empowerment of organizations and personas antagonistic to the player characters. The *Mage: The Awakening* series has always benefited from quality sourcebooks, and it's pleasing to see that the trend has continued through this most recent release. *Summoners*, with its myriad strange creatures, Faustian pacts and otherworldly artifacts, should provide plenty of fun – and frights – for most groups. Matt Staggs can be reached at mattormeg@gmail.com

Resa Nelson

The Half-Blood Prince, it's about sexual and emotional politics.

This is an official warning to the Harry Potter loyalists who expect the movie versions to exactly match J.K. Rowling's novels: *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (scheduled for release on July 17 from Warner Bros.) takes the most cinematic license to date.

For the rest of us, that's not necessarily a bad thing. Especially considering that Rowling herself is deeply involved in the making of every Harry Potter movie. In other words, Rowling approves all changes in advance.

"If I could have shot the whole book, I would have shot the whole book," says director David Yates (*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*). "But it would have been an eight-hour film." Although several elements from the book have been left out of the movie, the filmmakers decided to expand other parts. "In the book, Jo Rowling talks about bridges collapsing and Muggles being attacked in the background – she reports it. We're looking to bring that to the forefront of the film. I thought, 'Wouldn't it be exciting to see a bridge collapse with lots of Muggles in it?'" Yates opted to simulate blowing up London's Millennium Bridge, a footbridge spanning the Thames River. "Jo talks about it as a news item, so I put it in the script. It should be excellent."

"And to make the mayhem even more personal, the Weasleys' house will be destroyed. At the studio just outside of London, one of the new sets for Half-Blood Prince is the home of Harry's friend Ron (played by Rupert Grint) and his enormous family. The first floor is divided into two rooms: the living room and the kitchen, separated by a staircase. The well-worn furniture is crammed into the tiny living room. The equally small kitchen is jam-packed with neatly folded laundry stacked on top of an ironing board, food, and knick-knacks. But the upstairs is like the type of dizzying view found in M.C. Escher's art. The Weasley home may have a small footprint, but it's six stories high with seemingly endless criss-crossing stairways and hallways.

"Before filming began, Rowling joined the actors and filmmakers for the "read through," when the actors sit around a table and read the script out loud for the first time. "We were all very excited," Yates says. "We thought, 'That sounded great.' [Rowling] leaned over to me and she whispered, 'You know, you have to change a couple of things because Dumbledore is gay.' My first thought was, 'I'm not going to tell Michael [Gambon],' who plays Dumbledore, because that will completely throw him off.

"Actually, there's a line, [when Dumbledore is] looking at a poster of a very beautiful girl, and he says something like, 'I remember a girl. She has hair like spun silk.' He loves women. Not to sleep with women, but he loves the whole thing about women. So we had a long debate about do we lose that line – we stayed with it. The line is still there. Gay men can appreciate women and their qualities. [His sexual preference] is not really important in this story. His gayness – it's a wonderful thing to bring him out of the closet, as it were. The fact is that his sexuality is only part of his character. There are so many other things that are equally interesting and exciting about him. He's witty. He's funny. He's proud. He's graceful. He's eccentric … oh, and he's gay. That comes in a long list of things."

"Daniel Radcliffe adds that Rowling often gives them feedback that keeps the movies in synch with her novels and the overall story of Harry Potter. "She

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doesn't interfere at all," Radcliffe says about Rowling. "She came out here the other day. Unfortunately, I didn't see her because I was 20 feet under water at the time. I think they still send her design ideas and obviously they send her the scripts. She's saved us a couple of times on previous films." Radcliffe explains that a script for one of the previous Harry Potter movies had cut a character that had appeared in the novel. "She sent [the script] back and said, 'No, you can't cut him. If you cut him out of this one, then you will really tie yourself in knots when it comes to finishing the franchise."

"Radcliffe also reports that Rowling has been giving secret advice to actor Alan Rickman for the past several years about the character he portrays (Professor Snape). "I know that Alan for a long time has known things about Snape which nobody else did other than Jo," Radcliffe says. "I don't know if it was he that contacted her or that it was the other way around. I think since at least the third film, he's known something. And he's managed to keep it very, very quiet from what I can tell. I don't know exactly what he was told."

"In Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, Snape is at the forefront of the story. It's clear that Voldemort has returned because of the rise in murders and disasters happening among Muggles. Behind the scenes, Snape is in the thick of Voldemort's evil plans and acts as his accomplice. Even worse, Draco Malfoy (played by Tom Felton) is given an assignment to commit murder, and Snape makes an Unbreakable Vow to commit the murder himself should Draco fail.

"When the new school year at Hogworts begins, Snape finally ascends to the job he's always coveted: Defense Against the Dark Arts, which has been a revolving door for teachers in previous years. New professor Horace Slughorn (played by Jim Broadbent of Moulin Rouge!) takes over Potions. In Slughorn's class, Harry must borrow a textbook and ends up with a used one previously owned by a student who called himself the Half-Blood Prince and left the textbook riddled with

Luna Lovegood

Evanna Lynch had no experience in acting until a few years ago when she was cast as Luna Lovegood for The Order of the Phoenix. Because Luna is such an unusual character, casting was difficult. Out of 20,000 girls who auditioned, Lynch stood out as the obvious choice. Anyone who meets her understands why in a heartbeat.

Lynch doesn't just act like Luna Lovegood. Lynch is very much like Luna in real life. She speaks with the same lilting voice and radiates Luna's ethereal quality. "I'm like her in the way she believes things even if they don't have any proof," Lynch says. "If someone says 'Where's the proof?' she would say, 'Where *isn't* the proof?' I like to think like that and have an open mind about everything. We're different – I can get really stubborn about things. If I have a goal, I'm quite stubborn about it – I can't let it drop. I think Luna is more easy-going. She can accept things as they come to her."

Before joining the cast, Lynch was a fan of Rowling's books and dreamed of playing the role of Luna. But did she have any problems being a latecomer to the set? "A little bit, but I don't think that's just because I came late, although it would help if I didn't. Because I was such a fan, I wanted to be friends [with the other actors] but I always felt like, 'Why would they want that?' But they were so nice and so normal. Everyone wants to make the film and have fun. I think I feel more at home this time."

Lynch also had to adjust to learning to act vs. being just a fan. "It's different in that it's not that you're living the story. The acting is different. I didn't expect people to be so much of a family, but that's what makes it. Everyone wants to work together, and no one has any ego."

About her experiences on the Harry Potter set, Lynch says, "It changes every inch of you. First I wanted to be a writer, then a director. As of now, I want to work in theater, I think. But that'll change in a week."

Lynch was thrilled to meet J.K. Rowling at an event after the final book in the series was published. Unfortunately for Lynch, Rowling wore a dress covered in sequins. "She was hugging people. It was really painful. I got a scratch on my chin. It was my Deathly Hallows souvenir. I just couldn't stop looking at her."

Neville Longbottom

Matthew Lewis had already been acting professionally for a few years when he signed up to play a minor role in the first Harry Potter movie, never dreaming how far the journey might take him.

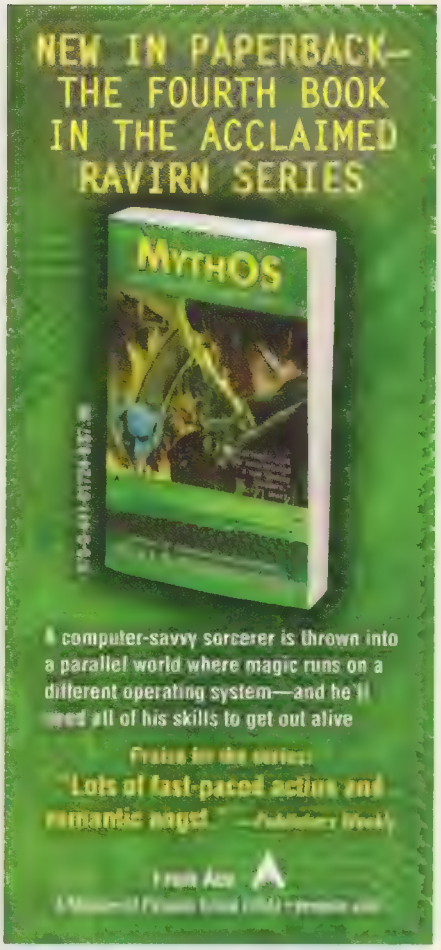
"Being a good friend of Harry's, he was always there by his side," Lewis says about Neville. "But I never expected it to become as important as it has. It was great to start off in the comic relief side of it and then see him grow into this very brave freedom fighter. There's a lot of depth to him. He's still Neville, who tries but doesn't always get it right. There's such a range of things I get to do as an actor. I love it."

Lewis has a soft spot in his heart for Neville and enjoys playing him. "I like making people laugh. Neville allows me to do that. Everyone just likes him. They feel sorry for him but you can't help not laugh at him. You're laughing with him. You appreciate his situation: getting hung from chandeliers by pixies and attacked by books. It's funny. I love that side of him.

"In this film, he's still shy, but he's appreciated now. He knows he's not the best at magic, but he knows he can do it if he really focuses. He's a lot more confident. There's a scene where he's at Slughorn's party. He didn't get invited and he knows that. He's got a job as a waiter. He finds the whole thing hilarious, because he doesn't understand the whole thing about etiquette and the celebrity side of it. It doesn't appeal to him, but he doesn't mind. He just wants to be there with his friends. [Director] David [Yates] thought that would be a nice way to play it: that he's laughing and joking around, thoroughly bemused by the whole situation but enjoying it."

In real life, Lewis is slender, handsome, and a snappy dresser. "I'm genuinely surprised when people recognize me. I like to think that I don't look anything like Neville. In Leeds, my hometown, they know there's someone there from Harry Potter, so they find it a little bit more believable if they see me. But in London I can go around fine. But sometimes I'll have a hat on and sunglasses, and someone will recognize me and I just don't understand how at all."

When asked about his future, Lewis says, "I just know that acting is what I want to do. It's all I've wanted to do since I was 4 or 5. If I can carry on in this industry, then that would be perfect. I applied to university, but I figure you go to university to get a degree to get a dream job, and I've already got one.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scribbled notes. When Harry's not trying to figure out who the Half-Blood Prince was, he spends much of the school year with Dumbledore as they delve deeper into Voldemort's past. At the same time, Harry finds himself attracted to Ron's sister Ginny, while Hermione discovers she's distressed by Ron's romantic attention to their classmate, Lavender Brown.

"To me, the main story in this one is the change in Dumbledore's and Harry's relationship between before (being pupil and head teacher) to what it is now, which is a general and a foot soldier," Radcliffe says. "While all the stuff with Harry and Ginny is wonderful and very sweet and touching, it's about the relationship with Dumbledore. It's a very poignant relationship."

"I really enjoyed making The Order of the Phoenix, but it's a very intense, emotional story and it was very Harry-centric," says Yates. "It was about his journey and his learning about his more complicated side. With this book [Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince], the most important thing was to catch the spirit and the fun of the relationship between the three main characters: Harry, Ron, and Hermione. And bring some of that character humor and that playfulness back. I remember when I read the first book, what I loved was the tone and a spirit that was very light on its feet. It was very playful and warm, and it made you feel like it was a nice place to be. With The Order of the Phoenix, because of the intense emotional stuff, I thought it was the wrong time to play all that warmth and character. We were doing a different gig, in a way.

"And with The Half-Blood Prince, it's about the sexual and emotional politics, which are very funny. It's Ron's first girlfriend, Lavender Brown. It's the friendship between Harry and Hermione. It's delicate, tender, funny, play-

ful stuff, which reminds me of that first experience with Harry Potter, when I read the first book. It's witty. It's playful. It's warm. I think it'll feel very different to what we did the last time. That's not to say it doesn't get dark toward the end, because these books do take you to some very dark, intense territory at times, but I describe The Half-Blood Prince as 'sex, drugs, and rock and roll' – it's actually more 'sex, potions, and rock and roll.' So the spirit of this one will be lighter of foot, I think, and that's a good thing."

"Another good thing is the constant growth of the young actors who have starred in all the Harry Potter movies. "They're all getting better at what they do," says Yates. "Tom, who plays Malfoy, has so much more to do than in the last couple of films. Malfoy's this off-the-hook villain – we know what he is. And Tom's got a real character to play: he's a child assassin. And [Draco is] really struggling with this mission he's been given. He's arrogant and proud. But at the same time, it's eating him from within. And so Tom's got all these layers to play. And he's doing some lovely work – really interesting, deep, quite moving stuff. He's never had the opportunity to do that before

And Emma's [Watson, who plays Hermione] doing some really delicate work. Some really funny work. And Dan, in the last film, it was all quite emotional. It was like a closed fist all the time, because that's what we needed to explore. And now he's trying a bit more comedy. With his experience onstage in Equus and the acting he's been doing, he's learning gear changes, which is great. You're suddenly seeing him play lighter. Interesting enough, when we started the film, he and I were in Order of the Phoenix mode. We suddenly thought, 'We've got to lighten up.' It's a romantic comedy. It's not going to work if it's all intense."

"While filming Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, the set was abuzz with the news that Warner Bros. decided to create two films out of the last Harry Potter book. At press time, shooting reportedly was scheduled to begin in February 2009 and last for about a year. The film that is shot during that time will be divided into two movies: essentially, parts one and two of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows. "There was a lot of talk around the studio," Radcliffe says. "'Can we do it in one? Can we do it in two?' And everyone had the right opinion. I was always of the mindset that it should be done in two, because I think that where in the other films there is stuff you can cut, like the house elf storylines, in the seventh there's actually so little that is surplus to the main drive of the story that there's not much you can cut. There's almost no subplots in the seventh because any of the subplots are worked seamlessly into the main story. I was thrilled when they were doing it in two parts, because I don't think we would have done it justice had we not." Resa Nelson's first novel, The Dragonslayer's Sword, was a Finalist for the 2009 EPPIE Award for Best Fantasy Novel and is the first novel in her Dragonslayer series. Her next novel, Our Lady of the Absolute, is scheduled for publication in mid-2010. Nelson has been a Quarter Finalist for the Nichol Screenwriting Award and a Semi-Finalist for the Chesterfield Screenwriting Award. Visit her website and blog at www.resanelson.com.

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Draco Malfoy

Tom Felton (The Borrowers) orig-inally auditioned for the role of Harry Potter, but he was cast as Draco Malfoy, Harry's nemesis. Although Felton hasn't had much screen time as Malfoy during the past several years, that's about to change with The Half-Blood Prince.

"In the last five films, he's very two-dimensional in many respects," Felton says about Malfoy. "You don't dive into the life of Draco and why he's such a pain in the ass. But this one goes into depth of explaining why and how he is that way. It's great to play a character that has such contrasting feelings inside. He's desperate to take the glory of being the chosen one and yet deep down he knows he's never going to be able to do it. So he's constantly battling himself, which is great fun to portray."

The constant battle within Malfoy happens because he's given the task of committing murder. "If the audience can empathize with Draco's scenario – at the beginning of the film you hate him, and at the end you think, 'Poor guy' – I like to think that's one of the goals of my job. How I go about it is another story. It's a case of showing those conflicting emotions as much as you can, as far as one minute he wants to do it and he's desperate, and the next minute he's crying in a toilet thinking he's never ever going to do this."

Like Radcliffe, Watson, Grint, and Lewis, Fenton has grown up while working on the Harry Potter movie set. "I'm very fortunate that I started Harry Potter when I was 13, so I already had a group of friends and I'd already gone through a few of the phases I knew I was going to go through, so to speak. More importantly, I had a chance to grow up around children before being exposed to the world of working. As much as I've enjoyed growing up with adults, I've always had a good set of friends from the first film who have never changed and never treated me any differently."

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Mystic Rhythms: Where words fail, music speaks. — Hans Christian Anderson

Before a swirling crowd, he roars -- a post-Apocalyptic prophet. Cascades of percussion and bass guitar drive dancers to a frenzy. Guitar tapestries and didgeridoo drones weave in and out of the storm, reverberating in your bones. Painted celebrants flank the band, spinning silks and shaking bells. The prophet Tzol reaches out to his people. It's not mere showmanship – this is *ritual*.

The band Kan'Nal understands the bond between musical artistry and magical intent. A project rooted in postmodern shamanism, Kan'Nal was "born from a messianic vision in a Guatemalan cave." According to the band's website, "Kan'Nal evokes . . . the old world on fire as the new dream comes awake." And as Tzol cries his new gospel to the crowd, he follows a long and respectable path of magic, myth and mystical inspiration.

"Music," said the philosopher Boethius, "is so naturally united with us that we cannot be free from it even if we so desired." Rooted in the sounds of our natural world – and perhaps the *super*natural world as well – music remains one of the most significant human arts. Music stirs emotions, rouses spirits, seduces elves and tempts gods and devils to dance. Inspiring "peak experiences," it can bring us *ex stasis*, outside ourselves. Music has been said to move stones, shatter walls and pitch kingdoms toward ruin or prosperity. Our modern world is *filled* with music . . . and yet, amidst all that sound, the significance of this art is often lost.

These days, it's easy to take music for granted. TVs, iPods and passing cars boom cacophony into every waking moment of our lives. The meaning of that word – "ugly sound" – underscores our problematic relationship with the art named literally for the Muses. Music has both "the power to soothe the savage breast, to soften rocks, or bend the knotted oak" (according to William Congreve) and also, as musical theorist David Tame asserts, the power to destroy. According to Tame's book *The Secret Power of Music*, "good music gives life; bad music kills." And while it's easy to debate Tame's definitions of "good" and "bad" music, there's certainly more going on between the beats than meets the eye.

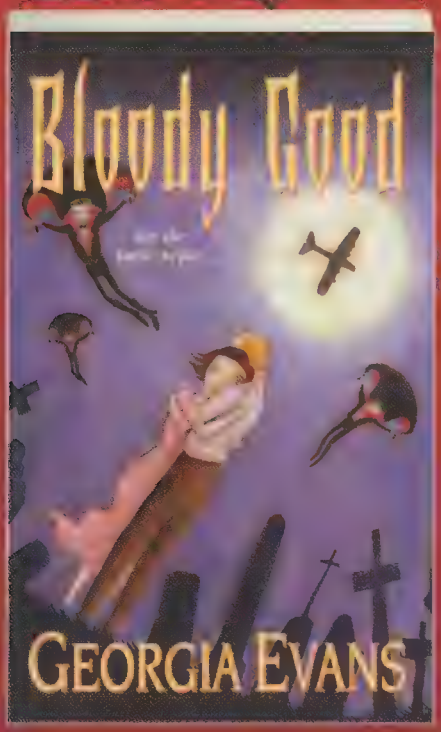
Before the 20th century, music was ephemeral, expressed "in the moment;" its sound vanished as soon as the performance ended. Among certain societies – like the villages of Africa or the courts of France – music was a common counterpart to daily life; in others, such as New English towns or Germanic villages, it was a rare treat, perhaps even a test of faith. Musical cultures, like the Roma "gypsies" or Muslim Sufis, evoked fearful fascination from their more conservative neighbors. Surely, there was something *uncanny* about such folk! Then and now, musicians seem almost otherworldly. Their arts shift the harmonies of life and death.

The first sounds a child hears are the rhythms of its mother's heart. At birth, he breathes deep and cries loud. To the child, *all* things are musical . . . and as we grow older, perhaps, music helps us return to that childlike fascination. Is it any wonder that the Faerie Queen fell hard for Thomas the Rhymer, or that aliens spoke to humanity through song in *Close Encounter of the Third Kind*? The harmonies, vibrations, beats and intervals of music guide the waves of creation itself.

Creation, it's often said, began with a single sacred birth-sound – a Kabbalistic thunderclap, a "Big Bang," or else the divine chant "Let there be light." In Hindu and Buddhist teachings, this sound was *OM*, the Primary Vibration from which all things come. *Om* resounds throughout Creation even now, transcending past, present and future, uniting everything and forming the ineffable root of being. From this primal sound rang the Cosmic Harmonies known to Chinese sages, or the Music of the Spheres explored by western mystics. Infinite variations and tonalities then shaped that music from formless chaos into forms both harmonious – and thus angelic – and dissonant . . . and thus diabolical. As violinist Yehudi Menuhin writes in his book *Theme and Variations*, "Music creates order out of chaos." However, in careless or malevolent hands, music may create *chaos* instead. Just as Joshua's horns brought down the walls of Jericho, so too might music bring down a nation.

When I smite my musical stone – be it gently or strong,
then do the fiercest hearts leap for joy,
and the chiefs do
agree among themselves
— chant of the court musician Konei

THE PARANORMAL POWER CLASH HAS BEGUN...



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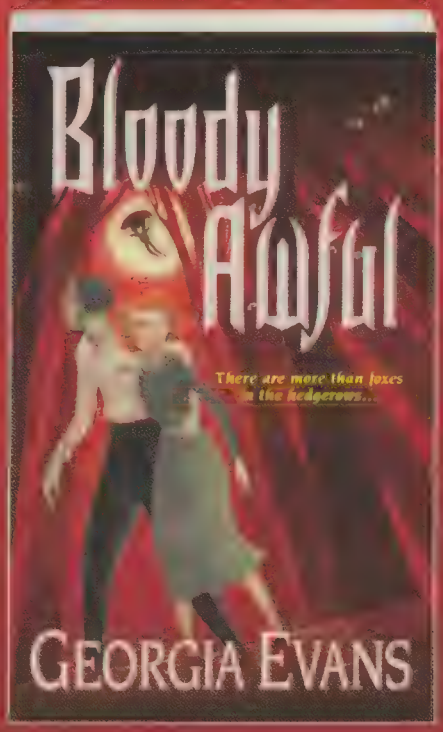

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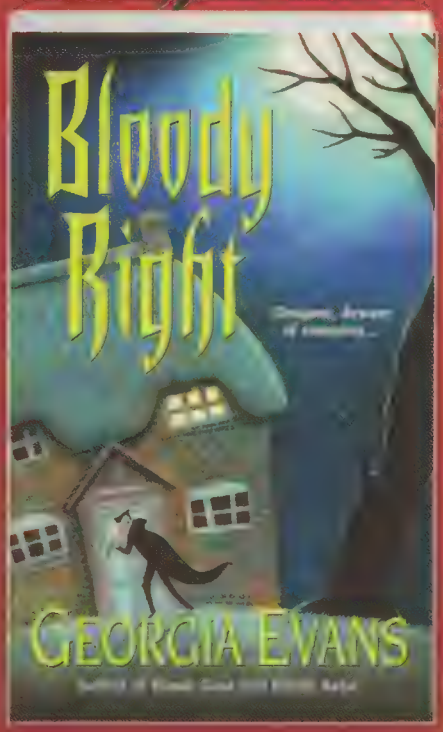

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In ancient China, the health of the kingdom was gauged, in part, upon its music. Ling Lun, minister to the legendary Yellow Emperor Huangdi, supposedly invented music in China around 2300 BCE. Observing six male and six female phoenixes singing, he cut lengths of bamboo and carved flutes which blew the ultimate notes balancing yin and yang. The Yellow Emperor had bells cast to mirror these notes, and the foundations of earthly harmony were created. According to the *Shu King*, the venerated Emperor Shun (2255-2206 BCE) traveled through the territories of China and gauged their stability by the pitches and notes of their music. Utilizing the eight kinds of musical instruments accepted by ancient Chinese philosophers – stone chimes, bell chimes, zithers, pipes, drums, reed mouth-organs, globe flutes and the wooden "tiger box" – the emperor would have musicians play local folk and courtly songs. Their performances were then checked against the five harmonious tones, particularly the *huang chung* ("yellow bell"), the pitch mirroring the perfect harmony of Cosmic Sound. If the arrangements, compositions or performances seemed overly passionate or unorthodox, Shun knew, trouble would follow. The ancient *Li chi* text asserted: *Music is the harmony of heaven and earth, while rites are the measurement of heaven and earth. Through harmony, all things are made known.*

Many traditions consider music to be the bridge between humanity and divinity. Legends of the West African Dogon people claim that a demigod sings the world into being each dawn; according to Marius Schneider, "When this ancestor of humanity sang, he moved his jaws and thus set the weft (of creation) in motion." Sangreet – the threefold sacred art of Indian vocal music, instrumental music and ceremonial dance – was gifted by Indra to the mortal Narada in order to entice people from wickedness and distraction. In a similar vein, Maheo the Creator passed the Sun Dance and its music on to the Cheyenne hero Horns Standing Up so that his people would not starve. Other gods, though, made music for their own sake. Athena created the flute to mimic the sound of her alter ego the owl, but then discarded it because playing the instrument made her look ridiculous. Lovesick Pan (who used a conch shell to "pan-ic" his enemies) shaped his infamous pipes from the body of Syrinx, a nymph who had turned herself into a bed of reeds to escape him. The great mother goddess Kybele invented the drums in imitation of her own heartbeat, while the angels of the Judeo-Christian god sang endless hymns to his glory. These acts, and others, inspired mortals in turn.

As from the pow'r of sacred lays
The spheres began to move,
And sung the great Creator's praise
To all the bless'd above;
So when the last and dreadful hour
This crumbling pageant shall devour,
The trumpet shall be heard on high,
The dead shall live, the living die,
And music shall untune the sky.

— John Dryden,
"Song for St. Cecelia's Day"

The sound that nurtures, though, may also destroy. The awful *Dipaka raga* would immolate anyone who sang it; when Emperor Akbar ordered the bard Naik Gopaul to perform that raga, the singer immersed himself in a river. So potent was the song that Gopaul not only burned alive from the inside out, but the river itself boiled from the heat of his death. Such are the dangers of musical fame!

According to many Christian traditions, Satan goads musicians to vanity and their audiences to sin. Whether or not he has to go "down to Georgia" at the time doesn't seem to matter much. Whip-poor-wills were said to capture souls through songs, though Lovecraft's poor Erich Zann

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used his own music – unsuccessfully – to keep unearthly horrors at bay. Sirens and mermaids sing their prey to disaster, while Dionysus drives mortals wild with frenzied songs and furious chimes. Shiva and Kali dance life into death, trampling their world, their enemies, and occasionally one another. The keening of the bean-sidhe foretells – or perhaps invokes – death for those who hear it, and the angelic trumpets of Judgment Day herald a bad time for almost everyone involved. The sublime harmony of Handel's heaven is mirrored by the ghastly cacophony of Bosch's hell. Even Lovecraft's bizarre Cthulhoid cosmology places the vast idiot-god Azathoth at the center of the universe, surrounded by mad pipers spinning blindly through the dark.

Although the first mortal harmonies have been lost to time, the metaphysician Hans Erhard Lauer envisioned them originating in the fabled Lemurian Period. This "wordless primordial song" predates human speech, and was characterized by the psychic Rudolf Steiner in intervals of *ninths*, not the intervals of *eighths* that give us the term "octave." "Anyone in those days," writes Lauer, "who either heard or chanted this primordial song would have been transported into the spiritual cosmic world among the gods . . . the sound was an echo in man of that supersensitive music that sounded in the spiritual worlds, as the gods revealed their joys and sufferings . . . in sounds of jubilation or songs of lamentation." Eons later, the people of Atlantis supposedly perfected a musical technology tuned to successive sevenths. This technology allowed adepts to build pyramids and walls of cyclopean size. Misuse of that technology, however, may have caused the catastrophe that sank the continent and scattered its children across the primal world.

The historical origins of music are far more humble. Songs probably began as imitations of animal sounds, instrumentation as slaps across one's leg or blows on hollow logs. The oldest apparent musical instrument – a cave bear femur roughly 40,000 years old and thought to be a Neanderthal flute – displays a desire to create sounds beyond the human range. The earliest known song transcribed by human hands was written in Mesopotamian cuneiform roughly 4000 years ago. By then, however, systems of tuning and techniques of instrumentation were in wide use. Egyptian paintings and Hebrew scriptures describe pipes, flutes, drums, chimes and stringed instruments. Many legends of divine interplay date from this period, as gods like Apollo, emperors like David, and monsters like the satyrs shared their talents with mortal musicians, and mortals often gave as good as they got. One Brule Sioux legend tells of a young hunter who learned from *Wagnuka*, the Woodpecker, how to make and play a flute; although the young man was a poor hunter, his musical gift soon helped him became a successful lover and a prosperous chief.

In time, civilizations rose, each one birthing distinct styles of musical art. The courts of T'ang Dynasty China may

have maintained over a dozen ritual orchestras of five to seven *hundred* musicians each. Jerusalem's temples featured devout choruses for the chanting of scripture. Majestic Persia boasted a dazzling musical tradition that ranged from percussive symphonies to plaintive flute drones and haunting *a cappella* songcraft. The Indian Samaveda asserted a rich system of *marga* (classical music); composed of hymns from the four Veda, this *samagana* contains visions and observations channeled into songs. And in Greece, the sage Pythagoras established the sacred science of musicology that still guides western musical theory today. Conceived as a reflection of the Music of the Spheres, the Pythagorean school employed songs as therapy, medicine, mathematical exercise and spiritual devotion. As Aristotle noted, the Classical Greek ideal of music "has thus the power to form character, and the various kinds of music based on the various modes, may be distinguished by their effects on character."

Beyond the courts, energetic folk music traditions grew up in rural towns and villages. Disreputable by the idealized standards of nobility, these musicians employed simple instruments, unaccompanied vocalizations and earthy themes. Such musicians were either self-taught or schooled by talented elders – between chores, of course! Such mastery was difficult to learn, and so aspiring musicians sometimes employed . . . *shortcuts* . . . that would later become familiar to the likes of Robert Johnson.

The element of magic was rarely far from the musical arts. A person who could raise such power was often thought to be in touch with gods, spirits, faeries or demons. Native American "secret songs" were drawn from vision-dreams; Orpheus was himself a child of Calliope, Muse of epic poetry; Indian men adopted the flute in adoration of Krishna, whose amorous tune called beautiful *gopis* to pleasures; in more austere fashion, Catholic monks and nuns forged a community of faith in angelic chants. Abbess Hildegard von Bingen wove haunting songs in Christ's name, while witches danced to the Devil's tune. A fine singing voice could get a boy castrated (to preserve it) or a girl burnt alive (to destroy its seductive potency). Either way, music held power far beyond simple sounds or words.

Civilizations grew to empires, and empires spread. Musical traditions blended with one another, sharing modes, instruments and inspirations developing through three genres: courtly music, which entertained, informed and glorified royalty; folk music, which expressed the lot of the common people; and sacred music, which evoked and celebrated the gods. Since one man's religion is another man's magic, this last tradition held metaphysical intent. Employing sacred mathematics and discipline, such music made things *happen*. Ideally, such arts allowed musicians to influence their world toward greater things; in practical terms, it channeled otherworldly power through song. Whether this was a good

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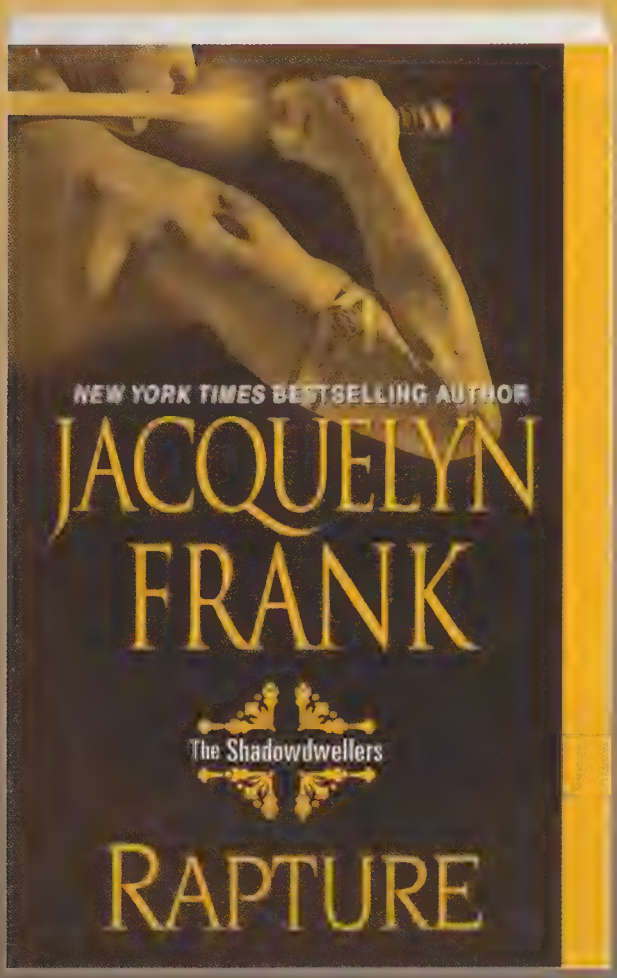

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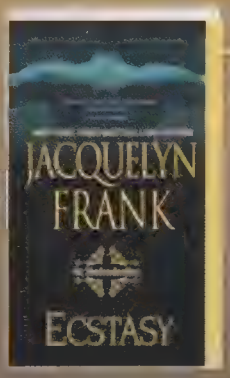

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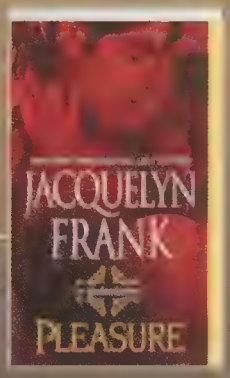

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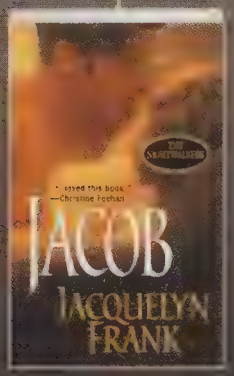

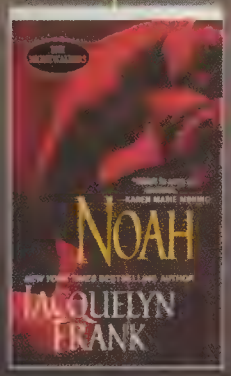

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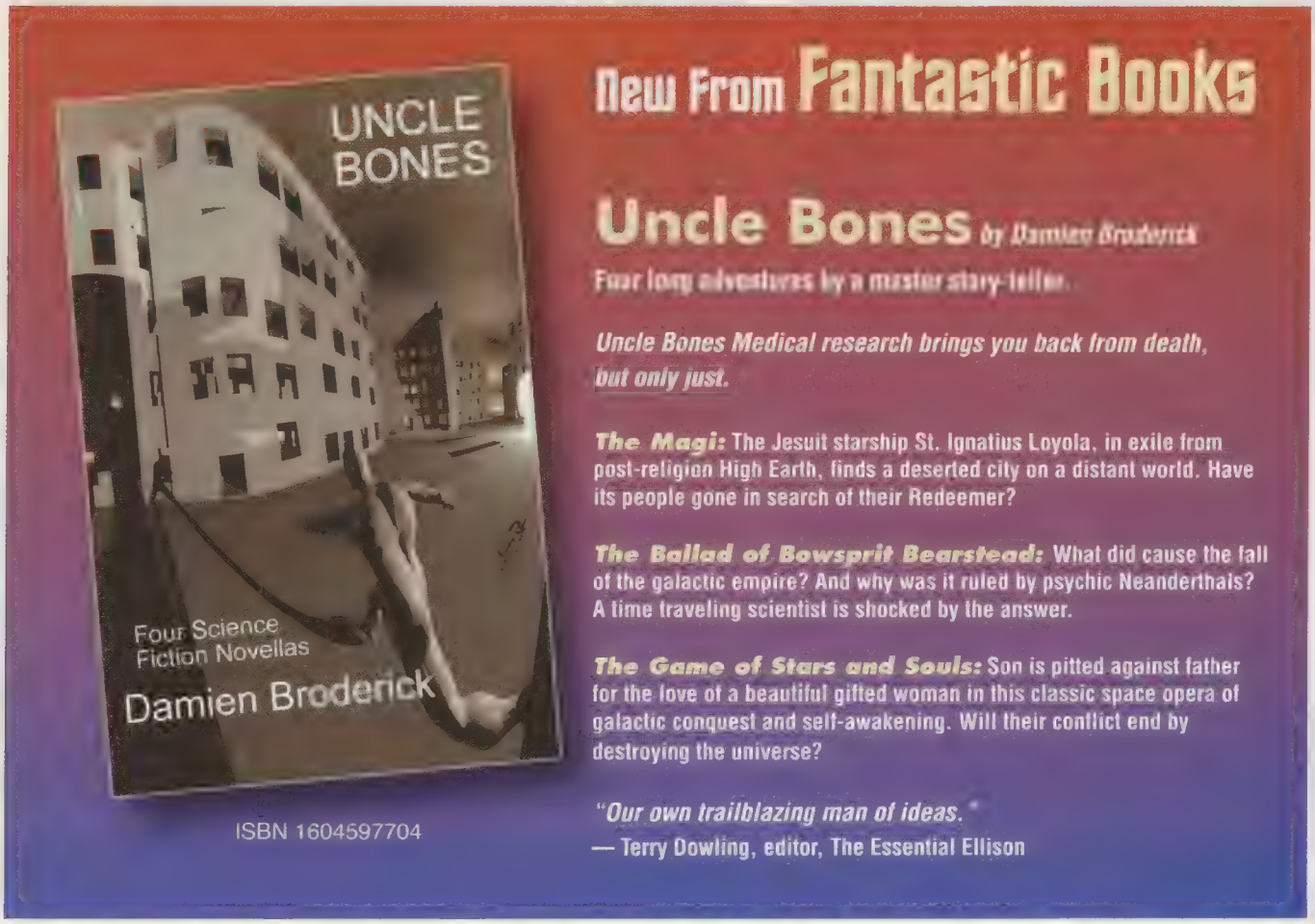
thing or not depended on how one felt about the singer's intentions. And so, some rulers banned certain kinds of music or – in the case of Arabian clerics and hard-line Puritans – banned music altogether.

Existing in between those realms, specialized poet-musicians appeared. Known as bards, griots, ashiks and many other names, these wisdom-keepers mastered complex songs of legend, gossip and devotion. Some, like the Hindu udgatr, were formal priests; others, like Nordic skalds, were gifted courtiers. French troubadours carried ballads across Western Europe, while the African Mandink jeli preserved the musical *djali* ("blood") of their communities and lords. These folk dealt closely with the otherworlds, sometimes romancing the faeries like Thomas the Rhymer, or singing down forgiveness like the medicine virgin Fawn, from the Great Spirit Behind the Sun. They might venture forth with only courage and music as their company, as does the girl in Edward Robert Hughes' painting *Midsummer Eve*, or attach themselves to powerful patrons, like Sir Robin's minstrels in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Neither path assured a long and healthy life . . . but then, neither does the Muse. To court her in her many guises remains the bard's reward.

With the refinements of civilization came refinements of musicology. Scholastic and esoteric systems developed around the notation and composition of songs. The Chinese, Indian and Persian empires developed such systems before the Common Era and then refined their traditions as the years went by. In Europe, a blend of liturgical music, Pythagorian mathematics and a growing class of professional composers gave rise, by the late Renaissance, to the European Classical style. As Europe's grasp expanded, this mode became the default tradition for all "proper" folk, influencing even the older traditions of the East. Complex arrangements, large orchestras and master-quality instruments gave European Classical a vast tonal and thematic range. To composers like Johann Sebastian Bach, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Ludwig von Beethoven, Classical music literally became a divine instrument. As Franz Liszt wrote in "On the Church Music of the Future": *Come, hour of deliverance, when poets and artists will forget the public and will know one slogan only: man and God.*

This esoteric element was deeply intentional. Carrying forward the sacred arts of Pythagoras, these composers sought to bring the Music of the Spheres to a troubled earth. Monteverdi employed Hermetic elements and Neoplatonic themes in his operas, especially *La Favola d'Orfeo* – "The Legend of Orpheus." About the composition of his famous *Messiah*, Handel said: "I did think I did see all Heaven before me and the great God himself." Mozart, a Freemason, utilized arcane themes and calculations throughout his music, particularly in his faerie tale opera *The Magic Flute*. Beethoven's Fifth Symphony has been described by David Tame as "the confrontation between mortal and immortal, man and the Supreme"; according to Beethoven himself: *Music is*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the mediator between the spiritual and the sensual life. And to that, he added: *For life is short, art eternal.*

Yet even this sacred music bore whiffs of brimstone. The demonic passions of Paganini inspired rumors of sinister pacts. The dissonant tritone was called *diabolus in musica* – "the Devil in music": supposedly, musicians who played it would be excommunicated or killed, though historically this seems fanciful[1].

Despite its ecumenical roots, Classical music favored uncanny tales. Faeries capered in Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Pagans reveled in Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. Composers literally brought Hell to earth through Mussorgsky's "Night on Bald Mountain," Saint-Saëns' "Dance Macabre" and Grieg's "In the Hall of the Mountain King." Stravinsky's *Firebird* weaves an "Infernal Dance," while Liszt has Faust bear a young woman away to the strains of his "Mephisto Waltz." Tartini dreamed of Satan playing his "Devil's Trill" long before Charlie Daniels beat Old Scratch to the punch. And poor Berlioz, driven by obsession, depicts himself murdering his beloved, being executed for it, and seeing her dance to his damnation during a witches' sabbat over the course of his *Symphonie Fantastique*. The Adversary and his minions were too compelling to ignore. Even the divinely musical Spheres had their metaphysical counterparts in the shattered dissonant "shells" of the Kabbalistic Qlipoth, the discarded elements of God.

Meanwhile, the earthly sins of European colonialism laid the groundwork for the next – and for today's world, most fertile – movement in music.

It began when the call-and-response vocal artistry of West African music, the percussive elements of African and Native American beats, and the complex strings and pipes of European and Middle Eastern orchestration collided in North and South America. Slaves, immigrants and natives brought their music to the raw frontiers of the so-called "New World." There, Kokopelli, Eleggua, Jesus and Old Scratch met at the crossroads and began to jam . . .

Blues fallin' down like hail
Blues fallin' down like hail
And the day keeps remindin' me
There's a hellhound on my trail
Hellhound on my trail . . .

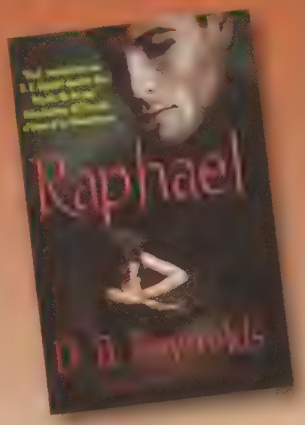
While Wagner crafted hymns to the Old Gods across the pond, a fusion of music both sacred and profane sprouted like weeds in the fertile hills of Appalachia and the muddy soil of the Mississippi Delta. By the mid-1800s, the young United States had begun to fuse diverse and often mystical impressions. Gospel combined African and European devotions; Celtic and Germanic folk music echoed in the rural hills. The Classical piano found a ragged place of honor in Old West saloons and post-slavery juke joints, while the plaintive cry of Native American chants echoed with Spanish guitars and British balladry. Louisiana's swamps stewed French, German, African and Native American songcraft, while the soaring flutes of Andean mountains echoed down to the flat plains beyond. The apocalyptic Ghost Dance asserted Native sovereignty in the face of genocide, and Vodou drums bridged the gulf between a life of slavery and a powerful faith.

In the American South, the Blues, named for the "blue demons" of melancholy lust, blues music swirled up out of cotton fields and back rooms. Whether or not he'd met the Devil, Robert Johnson did not invent the blues. Still, the haunted guitar slinger became an American legend; like Paganini and Thomas the Rhymer, he'd supposedly bartered for his magical gifts and was haunted by them in return. Blues music had a folklore all its own – a humid concoction of evil eyes and black cat bones, juju bags and hellish hounds, . The crossroads – a literally as well as symbolically significant place for post-slavery Black Americans – dominated blues music. At that crossroads, dramas of ruin and redemption were waged in 12-bar symphonies, many of which featured weird strangers in the night.

And then, someone turned on the lights.

The spark that jumped from electrical energy ignited an explosion of technology around the turn of the last century. Innovations of sound recording – first wax rolls, then wax discs, into record albums and CDs and beyond that into bytes of living information – allowed music to transcend the moment of performance and become what Led Zeppelin termed "physical graffiti." Even Aleister Crowley

Raphael
by D. B. Reynolds
Book One in the Vampires in America Series



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Half Past Hell
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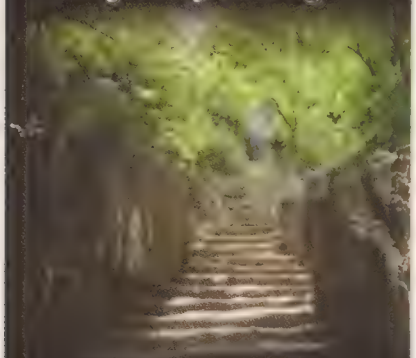

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got into the act; long before he fascinated guitarist Jimmy Page, the Great Beast sought "to synthesize the aim of religion and the method of science" by recording his Gnostic mass with newfangled gear. As subcultural weatherman Eric Davis writes in his book about Zeppelin's literally magical fourth album, "ghosts grew in the grooves" of record albums. For the first time, the embodied breath of musicality could be heard by people who'd never met the live musician. Author David Troop notes: "Frozen in time within the grooves, a voice, an instrument, a sound, becomes the living dead and is worshipped in the way that a loved one, deceased, may be adored for years . . . " The record album soon became a 20th-century talisman, immortalizing ephemeral moments into constructed eternities. Thomas Edison (himself a spiritualist who tried to capture ghostly voices through radio waves) considered the phonograph his greatest invention. With it, the Muse could be captured, tamed and brought to market.

Similar leaps in technology allowed halls to be lighted, instruments to be amplified, and sounds to be broadcast – Hermes-like – through the air. Experiments with these new gadgets bred strange new sounds and styles. Crumbling Victorian idealism led artists to storm the walls of possibility, with decidedly mixed results. Claude Debussy probed occult dreamscapes, obsessed with cats and inspired by the nightmares of Edgar Allen Poe; Arnold Schoenberg dismissed the musical "keys" to cosmic harmony. Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* set poems by defrocked monks to music while Gustav Holst sent the spheres spinning with his masterpiece, *The Planets*. As Theosophist composer Cyril Scott sought the ancient wisdom of Ascended Masters, Surrealist Man Ray crafted "music" from random sounds and industrial machines. Adolf Hitler adored Wagner's mythic *Parsifal* and *Ring* cycle because he believed they confirmed the superiority of Aryan culture; the result was the greatest slaughter in human history. As always, music inspired both innovation and destruction.

Most significantly, this new technology preserved and disseminated music from Appalachian mountaintops, Amazon rainforests, Tibetan temples and far more. Sacred music, courtly music, profane music and everything in between became grist for the sonic mill. By the end of World War II, daemons had been unleashed that could never again be contained.

If blues was the Devil's music, then its offspring – jazz, country, soul and rock – were its four horsemen. Thundering across electric highways, these fertile musicologies plundered everything they could find. Amplified shamans of the post-war era ranged from Heaven to Hell to Faerie and beyond in search of inspiration. Along the way, they opened gates, blew minds, and shattered divisions of "high" and "low" music forever. Screamin' Jay Hawkins embodied Baron Samedi, waving juju sticks and raving "I Put a Spell on You." Jerry Lee Lewis fought battles for his soul across the keys of his piano. Shawnee guitarist Link Wray channeled Thunderbird by way of the blues, inventing the power chord and inciting a great "Rumble." A pelvis-swingin' good 'ol boy became King, a Man in Black bore Christ and Satan on his shoulders, and four cute Brits became gurus for future generations. It was fire-n-brimstone in the pulpit and sweat-n-fire in the streets. Old Pan himself would have been proud.

While most of these artists sought mere expression or indulgence, others played more mystical refrains. Electric shamans like Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix and Carlos Santana composed and performed with magical intent. Morrison, in particular, claimed Native American ghosts as his companions: *Indians scattered on dawn's highway bleeding . . . the souls of one or two of 'em . . . were just running around freaking out, and just leaped into my soul. And they're still in there.*[2] Hendrix employed tonal frequencies he heard in dreams, and experimented with bendable mirrors in order to reach past physical reality and grasp the human soul. Even now, Carlos Santana talks to spirits, angels and ghosts; he once renamed himself Devadip Santana, after the deva spirits who illuminate the mortal world through song. Another living deva of sorts, Ravi Shankar, helped popularize Indian music and culture in the western world. For better and worse, his sitar drone became a mainstay of 1960s rock.

As rock rolled on, arcane inspiration became the name of the game. Prog bards

like Rush and Jethro Tull spun classical traditions toward Sword & Sorcery, while the cosmic jazz of Sun Ra and Chick Corea and the alien funk of George Clinton, Bootsie Collins and Frank Zappa bent music into extraterrestrial shapes. The Moody Blues went *In Search of the Lost Chord* (Om), while Pink Floyd jammed with *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn*. Even the faeries reappeared, their ballads restored by modern minstrels like Steeleye Span and Fairport Convention. The Pied Piper had returned, this time with an electric guitar.

Toward the darker end of the spectrum, Jinx Dawson and her band Coven recorded a reputed Black Mass on their album *Witchcraft Destroys Minds and Reaps Souls*; a similar ritual intrudes on the Rolling Stones' psychotropic opus *Their Satanic Majesties Request*. For Kenneth Anger's film *Lucifer Rising*, Bobby BeauSoleil composed a heady soundtrack . . . while in prison for the Manson murders[3]. Black Sabbath bassist Geezer Butler claimed to have been visited by a "dark shape at the end of my bed" soon after the band began its sinister career; the incident inspired him to throw away a book of magic he'd been reading, though Sabbath – and their singer Ozzy Osborne – never quite shook their bleak reputation. Deliberate diabolism became stock-in-trade for a generation of heavy metal artists inspired by Sabbath, cartoon-fetish metal gods Judas Priest, and the tongue-in-cheek deviltry of Venom, the band that coined the term "black metal." The 1990's saw a spate of murder, suicide, cannibalism, racial assault, and church burning among Scandinavian black metal-heads. And yet the sinister beat goes on . . .

The ultimate act of magical musicality may be the classic fourth album by Page's band Led Zeppelin. Mingling influences from Crowley, Tolkein, blues legends and chaos magic, Zeppelin crafted a musical Tarot deck of enduring potency. Eric Davis chronicles the arcane details in his book about that album – details that include evangelical tantrums, haunted mansions, enigmatic sigils and mysterious black dogs. Whether is truly "a shrink-wrapped amulet," one of the best rock albums ever recorded, or both depends on your point of view.

By the 1980s, that "point of view" seemed decidedly infernal. While popular music grew more banal, evangelical hysteria spawned a new mythology around it. In this folklore, logos became Luciferian codes and band names became acronyms like "Knights In Satan's Service." Rumors of live sacrifice and secret encryptions reached absurd apotheosis when Judas Priest was put on trial for homicidal "backmasking": supposedly placing subliminal messages in the albums that inspired fans to kill themselves. It was as if Cotton Mather had returned to purge MTV, and although the Priest escaped execution, rumors of satanic influence in the music industry continue to this day.

Magic courses through younger forms of music, too. Reggae, for instance, is overtly mystical, with elements of ancient spirituality and postmodern synergy. Hip-hop bears a more aggressive edge, but spins old-time religion and sci-fi futurism among its ghetto gospels. Near the roots of both forms sits Lee "Scratch" Perry, an electric alchemist of freeform wizardry, and the messianic figure of Bob Marley. Other hip-hop artists sling ghosts (Tupac Shakur), voodoo queens (Ice-T) and horny extraterrestrials (Kool Keith) throughout their rhymes. Canibus weaves primordial aliens, government conspiracies and Apocalyptic prophecies into raps whose mathematical precision would awe Pythagoras himself. Meanwhile, rock's techno-industrial stepchildren transcend their cold beginnings to add fallen angels (VNV Nation), lustful dreamscapes (Enigma), demonic revels (Electric Hellfire Club) and Egyptian gods (The Crüxshadows) to their mechanical mix. Eclecticists like MIDIval PunditZ, Emilie Autumn and the Mediæval Bæbes take bits of *everything* and stir it together with mystical intent. If faeries stormed an alien cathedral, they might sound something like this!

In the wake of rock, country, soul, jazz and the blues, an era of "new music" has dawned. Drawn from ancient traditions, classic musicology and electronic innovation, this

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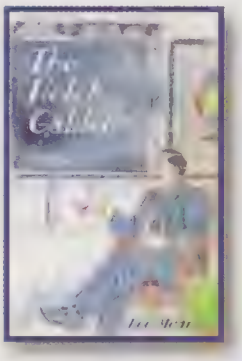

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wave is intentionally transcendent. Modern griots like Baaba Maal, neomedievalists like Dead Can Dance, sacred chanters like Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and electronic voyagers like Kitaro all claim otherworldly inspiration. Fey sirens (Tori Amos) share airtime with sonic barbarians (The Sword) while tricksters (Voltaire), witches (Wendy Rule) and prophets (Kanye West) conspire. Technovangelists like Moby weave electric prayerbooks and shamans like Kan'Nal pound out gospels of living sweat. As our new millennium enters its second decade, a vivid fusion of mystic legendry and musical artistry draws in its breath, picks up the beat and begins to dance.

Despite fear, banality and greed, music remains *magical*. Whether this magic leads us toward David Tame's sonic cataclysm or "brings down the fire" of Kan'Nal's enlightened future is anyone's guess. As the electric shaman dances, his devotees rejoice. This tune, this beat, this experience – it can't be bought or bartered or rated on *American Idol*. Music transcends language, time and culture. At its best, it becomes sublime. As Master Koot Hoomi, legendary sponsor of the Theosophical Society, is reputed to have said: *To-day, as we enter this new Age, we seek, primarily through medium of inspired music, to diffuse the spirit of unification and brotherhood, and thus quicken the vibration of this planet.* Music shakes bones, stirs souls, and gives passion an eternal voice.

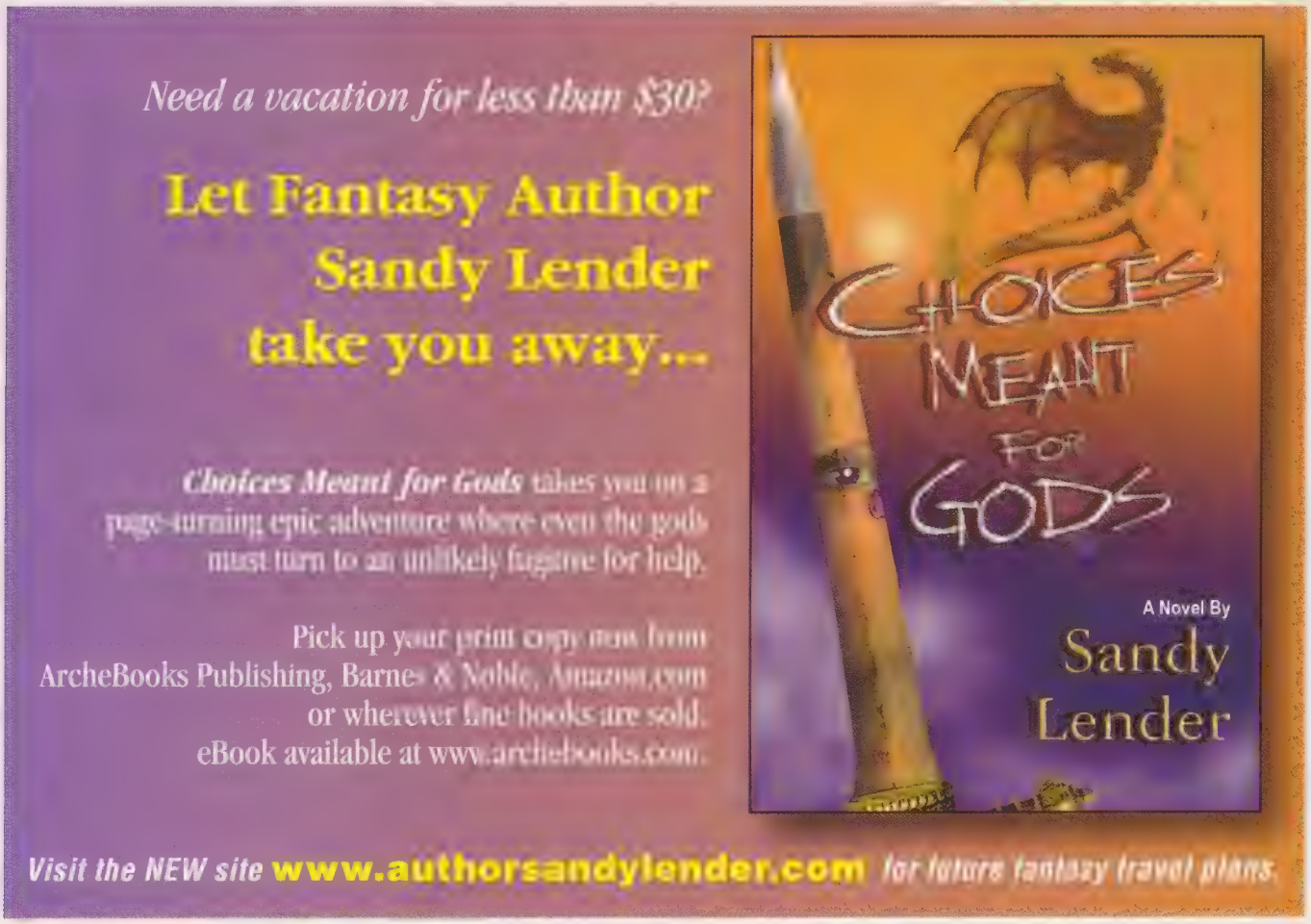
May you raise your eyes
and never bow your head
We are not alone

—S.J. Tucker, "Come to the Labyrinth"

[1] Probably good news for the band Black Sabbath, who used the tritone as the foundation of their self-titled song on their self-titled debut album.

[2] From the poem "Dawn's Highway," excerpted in the song "Peace Frog."

[3] The original composer, incidentally, was supposed to have been Jimmy Page.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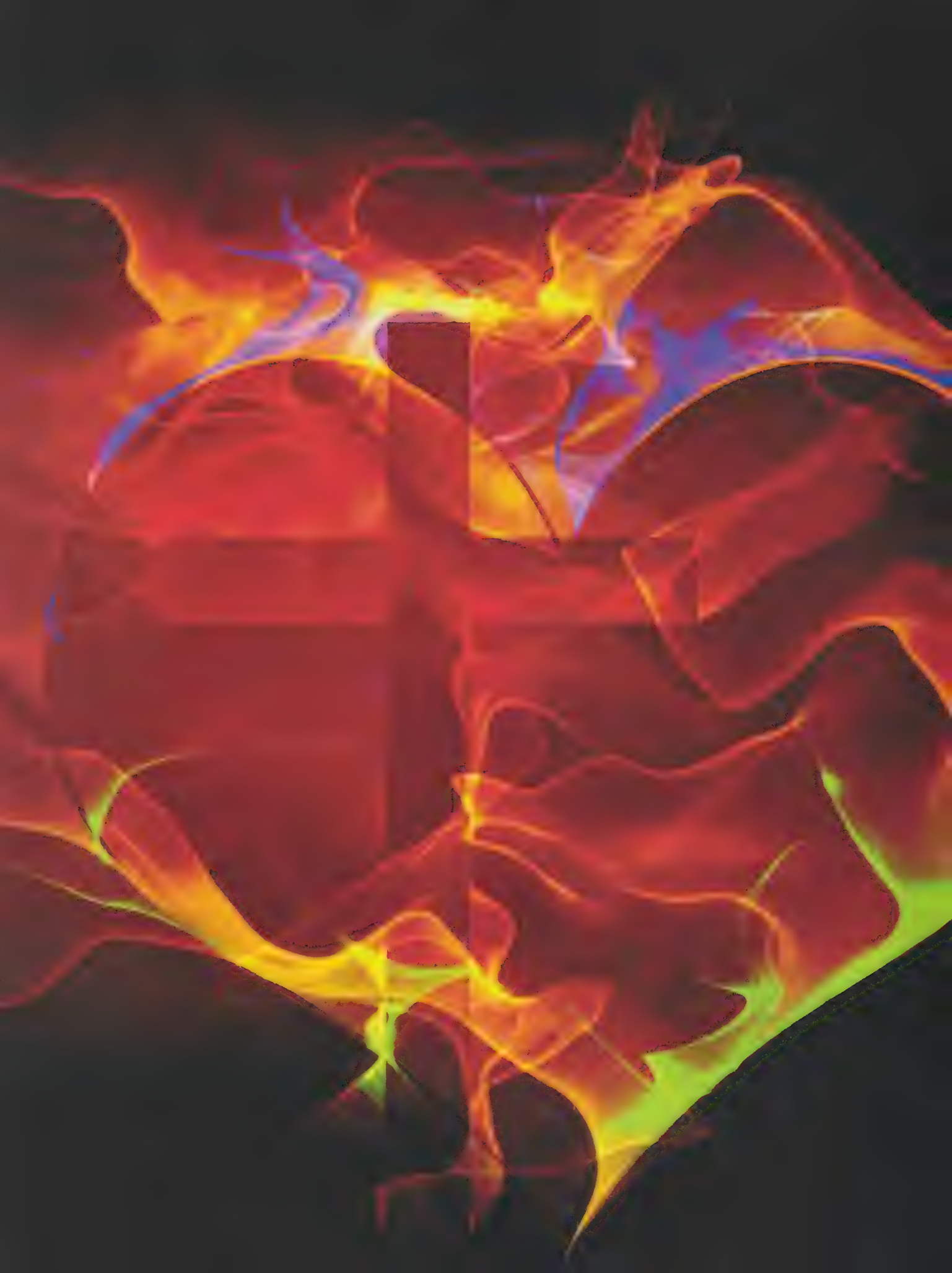

There is evil in the world and neither our knowledge nor our faith can vanquish it. Only one force can.

By Tanith Lee

Our Lady of Scarlet

During a visit by the plague, it was thought the color red was a means of warding off sickness. The colors of plague, after all—like those of death—were quite otherwise. Red meanwhile symbolized the shade of untainted blood. For this reason then red draperies poured from windows or clad beds of the rich, red flowers were grown, red wine was the popular beverage. While those also cunning or wealthy enough to afford expensive dyes and ornaments, put on coats and gowns of crimson, and trinkets of ruby, or ruby-tinted glass.

Andelm, however, believed in none of this.

He was in his twentieth year, well-favored and talented, and the student of a secretive society both alchemical and scholastic. Andelm accordingly foresaw for himself a shining future which even plague could not interrupt, let alone dismantle. He had placed his faith in different powers. They had nothing to do either with red, or with God.

In the dawn-early street therefore as he took himself to his studies, or in the summer twilight as he returned, he did not flinch from the dreadful carts which trundled up and down the thoroughfares. Actually he looked them over with a certain merciless interest. Pulled by one or a pair of pale, gaunt nags or desolate donkeys, each had its driver and sometimes a secondary man. These fellows were usually coarse and pitiless themselves. Either they had been condemned by utter poverty, or drawn unlucky lots, to take on this work. They feater moment by moment almost certain infection from the carts' mortal contents. Or else they had already had the plague and survived it, which would tend to leave them scarred, and some strange way psychically poisoned both by the disease and their recovery from it.

Now and then, student and self-certain as he was, Andelm persuaded the live men on the carts to let him look more closely at the dead ones. On the mobile wooden table, corpses lay thick as a catch of herring. They were bound for the plague pits outside the city walls. Here they were flung in and coverletted by quicklime—or else burned on a communal fire. (By now the city was massed with such smokes, and too the smokes or burning tinctures and herbs said, like red, to protect.) Many of the cadavers were naked. Even those who had been dressed, especially the *well*-dressed, had had most or all of their clothing stolen by any, as for example the cart drivers and their mates, who no longer had cause or margin to fear contagion.

So Andelm was able easily to inspect many aspects of plague death. Its black swellings and their reeking leakages; the wrongly colored greenish or black blood that here and there issued; the

composure or reverse of the dead. He beheld in this way disturbing sights. Such as a beautiful young woman, cool and pale as alabaster, laid in the cart in a poor little shift no one had wanted to steal. All unsightliness was either hidden or absent. Perhaps she had in fact died of some other malady, even been murdered. Another time Andelm had marveled at the assorted contortions of death agony. And once at two children, sat in the cart bolt-upright, with blank eyes wide, their hands locked each in the other's in a heart-searing final clutch now, due to morbidity, inseparable.

It must be said Andelm's own heart was not wrung, though no scene ever left him unmoved. His purpose in this wicked world of sins and ailments was, he believed, to *learn* and so to grow powerful in knowledge. Only then might he assist Mankind. Rather than weep or faint or curse at the horrors of the plague, he sought to be tutored by them. When once or twice the strings of his heart gave off a human twang of shock or grief, he mastered them with the thought that one day he might alleviate or prevent such happenings.

And then he would pass calmly on to his lessons and work at the academy, and return after to his further reading and his work in his modest lodging, above the Sun's Head Inn.

That night Andelm returned there very late.

He had been forced to wait, if not without curiosity, as a procession of priests went along with lit candles, singing a Mass for the soul of some aristocratic person just then claimed by plague. The casket lay closed, on a bed of dripping silks (none of these red), and was drawn by two black horses. Many mourners accompanied the hearse, they carrying long black or white feathers. The rumor was the mighty man had also been a writer of note. Andelm had never heard of him nor did he much care. The student had scarce time for books that were not educational, none for poetry or plays.

At last reaching the inn, Andelm went through the yard into the common-room, which formerly, since the disease began to stalk, was almost or totally vacant. Tonight though a change had come about. Despair itself produces symptoms, this being one of them. For reckoning themselves lost, a crowd of people had gathered to mingle in the normal way, eating much and drinking vastly, and now acting too in the most lascivious manner, man with woman, woman with woman, and man with man.

Andelm did not linger long. He was neither offended nor aroused by the view of some pairs of naked breasts, not the flash of active buttocks in a shadow beyond. He had already glimpsed such things in other places, and himself took no interest either in sex. He had no spare moments for it.

Despite this non-diversion, on his gaining the upper floor, something *did* give Andelm pause.

A large neglected room along the narrow corridor, some fifty paces from his own, had been opened wide. In the past various lumber was stored there, and occasionally a drunk had got in and made a nest, filling the area briefly with stink.

Now the room was altered. It had apparently another purpose.

Andelm, concealed by the darker corridor from the room's currently well-lit space, stood a few seconds to watch what went on.

Then he moved away, and undoing his own door went inside.

Even there, however, with the wood of the door muscularly shut and bolted against the rest of the inn's noise, Andelm was soon aware that sounds from the neighboring room yet penetrated his sanctuary in a way the general row did not.

He found himself disturbed.

He at first considered this might have had to do solely with the fact that what went on in the upper room, unlike the carnality in the common-room, bore a similarity to certain rites practices at intervals by the alchemic secretive society of which he was a member. Both they, and those in the room, had a semblance of the religious. Both were formal, possibly archaic in origin, immeasurably intense—and filly Godless. On the other hand Andelm, seating himself to dissect the matter, did not think mere appearances had much bearing on this reaction. No, rather it was the sense of *power* that might ritually be conjured among the students of his society. The same perception that an equal, if quite *unlike* power was rising there, in the upper room, only fifty odd paces from him. And their door stood wide, so any might witness it.

Some while Andelm wrestled with his thought. He ignored the sparse and well-known furnishing of his chamber, the half loaf and dish of now-cold broth put ready for him with his pot of ale. He ignored his two books and the sheaf of papers lying ready, with pen and ink.

Presently he admitted to himself he must go back and take a second glance at the other room. Maybe he had been mistaken. Maybe the hot, smoke-stifled streets, the later hour, had made him fanciful. And maybe something even more significant than he believed went on along the corridor.

Within the room ... any rubbish was cleared away, the old broken chairs conceivably chopped for winter fuel. The bedframe had been taken apart and stored elsewhere. All other former items had also vanished. Nor did any human stench loiter. The room had been scrubbed and some aromatic burned there, as on the streets outside.

Candles threw a dense, ruddy glare from the iron wall spikes, and in their own vulpine light the melting wax on them ran like thin, reddish blood.

Some twenty or twenty-five people of both genders were in the room. They crushed together in a snake-like, circling formation, their hands fixedly clasped (reminding Andelm, in sudden uneasy memory, of the two dead children in the cart). Each head was turned, in several cases almost wry-necked, so every one of them might gaze of what dominated the room's farthest end. There, where the old bed had been with mice busy in the mattress, now rose a stand of some sort, concealed beneath a blood-red drapery. And on the stand—

In height, the carven figure, that of a female, was not much more than two feet, far less than half the height of a man. Nor was it of any fineness, but rough in outline and feature. And yet, in candle-red it glowed and had great presence.

Andelm could see at once it had been made to mimic, if not replicate, figures of the Virgin Mary. Unlike the Virgin though, the woman it represented was shown wearing a plain yet revealing gown, that clearly described the shapes of breasts and thighs beneath. The carved robe had been stained a ripe red, and the

figure's unveiled head was garlanded with hair painted the shade of the rusty Eastern spice known as ginger. The face, too, while having no subtlety of line or expression, possessed much vitality. The red lips curved in a hungry smile; the dark eyes, rather than convey the deadness of the statue, glittered hard as jet stones. She seemed amused, this immodest red Virgin. She seemed more than—yet essentially *kin* to—*human*.

Going back Andelm had been incautious. Probably, despite their averted heads, they had noted him go by before, even expected his return, been *waiting*.

From the group he immediately heard call the strong loud voice of Stollia, the inn-wife. "Come in and join us, Master Andelm. Any may attend. Don't stand aside on ceremony. There's no disrespect we offer you. All are one at this."

Andelm had the urge to fly. He was unused to such feelings, brave as he was with his self-assurance and selfless self-absorption.

But he forced himself rather to reply with a question.

"What is it then, mistress, that you do?"

"What does it look like? We worship Our Lady here."

"Is she your Lady?" asked Andelm, as cooly and sensibly as he could. "Surely our only Lady is the Mother of our Lord, Virgin Marya, who steps between us and God's wrath." He himself credited none of this, of course. He had been educated much beyond it from his seventeenth year. But he knew the ways of the unlessoned world, and was always careful to pay lip-service any any other unavoidable dues to the majesty of the Church.

But Stollia said straight out, "God forsakes us and Christ forsakes us, and the Virgin Marya has gone deaf to our pleas. Otherwise wouldn't the plague death have been blown away?" ("True, it is true,"muttered other voices in the heated, perfumes, reddened room.) "So we have found another savior. Here she is, for Tibar the carpenter fashioned her to help us. She *hears* us. *She* will listen. She is the Red Virgin. She knows the proper color of our blood and will take care of us. Step in and pray to her, master. It'll lift your spirits better than ale."

But Andelm had stepped back until his spine touched the wall of the passage, through his coat and his skin.

Where he had never feared privately to mock the Virgin Marya, or even God, with his disbelief, Andelm knew now a deep and feral terror of this scarlet icon. He would rather, it seemed to him, spit on the feet of Christ upon the church crucifix, and before the priests too, than give a single word to *this* one.

"I thank you, but I must get to my studies," he said, still in a polite, cool tone. "May you be happy in your new faith."

And turning abruptly, while they made a slight sullen scornful noise behind him, he hurries back to his chamber, again closed and bolted the door, and now also propped there a heavy chair with both the heavy books on it. About an hour after this, he additionally sprinkled salt across the inner threshold.

Throughout that night, he sensed a Presence at the inn, inside its confines. He sensed the movement of this being, below in the ultimately unenthusiastic tumble of the common-room, from which, post midnight, only a few groans and lamentations issued. Coincidentally in the passage outside the upper rooms.

It had been born, he knew, in the *adjacent* room.

It was, he knew, the essential volatile element of the creature he saw on Stollia's improvised altar. The Red Virgin.

Rising before dawn as always, but now leaden and nervous from lack of sufficient sleep, Andelm detected how the horrible travesty slipped back, if only a short distance, from the outside of his door, It was flirtatious, it seemed, with one who instinctively disliked yet also was afraid of it.

Andelm had the urge to fly. He was unused to such feelings, brave as he was with his self-assurance and selfless self-absorption.

To admit fear was novel for Andelm. To be afraid was quite alien to him. A further lesson, this one appeared more unpleasant than even the most upsetting of those ordeals he had willingly endured in order to enter the secret order. The fear was worse, too, he supposed, than any ordinary fear of death. That hunter in black, whose scythe swept so often across the streets outside, Andelm had acknowledged but never so far shrunk from, certain no harm would come to him, no price be exacted, for his youthful days were to be long, and his destiny fixed.

His intention was to go straight to the academy, and there seek advice from the Grand Master. However, arriving at the academy doors he found them boarded up, and daubed with the plague sign. Presently he learned from a fellow student in a nearby tavern that the Master had been taken sick in the evening and died before sunrise. His flock had scattered. Most of them feared they too were marked by disease, as did this fellow, who now sat drinking and weeping. "What use then, all our learning and cunning, Andelm?" he wretchedly asked. Andelm would have chided him, but saw with his apothecary's eye the sweat of fever already on the man's face, and that his armpit seemed sore.

The city was clogged everywhere by now with the ceremonies and accessories of the plague. Drunkenness and sexual events were on display in doorways and alleys, and even the street itself, only part concealed by smokes. Though carts still passed inexorably along their never-ending journeys to and from the outer burial-and-burning grounds, other traffic had come to a standstill, and in many places undisguised robbery and other violence occurred. Everywhere were scrawled the plague signs, and everywhere the smoke, and the red cloths hanging down like arrested tongues. The dirty killing air was full of vague moaning and sudden slicing shrieks.

Andelm returned to the Sun's head. He found there a yet more strident daylight recreation of the previous night's orgy. A young woman and man came to Andelm at once. They began to paw

him, spilling their red wine over his coat. "There! An anointing—we worship the Red Virgin! She'll keep us safe. Come, let us anoint you another way—No? Don't you carry a rod in your breeches then?"

But Andelm thrust them off and ran upstairs to his chamber.

Emerging from it that morning, and feeling the Presence had withdrawn, he had seen the door to the other room was ordinarily shut. But curious smears were all over the passageway. They were like those an enormous snail might have created, if it had slid back and forth—and its slime was scarlet. That had alarmed him, but he had had his plan to take refuge at the academy.

Now Andelm had no other sanctuary save this one. With some unspeakable something passing below and closely up and down beyond his door.

By now the red slime had dried and turned dark as old blood in the corridor.

It was true, his dread had increased. His horror of the rough-carved figure, or rather its *essence*. He was certain it could and would protect none of them. Wrongly conceived and conjured, it was in itself both malign and acquisitive. It had been grown out of general terror of the plague, and so had become, in some unreasonable yet appropriate way, a component of and assistant *to* the plague. (Added perhaps also to his fear besides, was Andelm's no doubt unconscious abhorrence of women, that was, their carnal possibility.)

By now the red slime had dried and turned dark as old blood in the corridor. Andelm sprang past and over them and into his room.

Here he locked and bolted, then flung of all his clothes and his shoes and sprinkled both them and himself with measure of the precious salt. Taking other occult ointments from his cupboard, unguents he knew well from his training, he set about protecting his room as best he could. The chamber had become his castle besieged.

All that remained to him of food was the half loaf he had not tasted, some cold broth and ale from the previous night's supper, besides a stale slab of cheese in a box he kept to tempt mice away from his books. He had a stoop of water too; three days old it was, but better than none.

Many persons had done similar things to that which he now did, but their efforts had been all to avoid plague. His care still was not that. It was solely to avoid—*her. She*, the Red Virgin who had made her lair at this inn.

It was Stollia's fault, he had decided. Stollia—Woman, authoress of the Downfall of Man. For, without crediting religion, its analogies and ciphers he had taken to heart. If not made from a rib, if not ever having eaten of a deceptive apple and—worse—*shared* it, yet Andelm knew Woman was more bestial, the less to be trusted, and the fount of a power ungovernable and uneducable: Fatal.

And Stollia (Woman), had given orders for the carving and painting of the Red Virgin. Stollia was the priestess. Stollia had always lorded over her weak husband, therefore over the inn. Now her creation, birthed from the womb of Stollia's frightened animal mind, lorded over *all*—even the plague itself. For *she*, Our Lady of Scarlet, was an anathema. To a lucid man, no devil, but the demon-enemy of logic, swept out, burning bright, into the hell of life.

It was virtually an axiom them, the rest being so, that Andelm would be of prime fascination to *her. Him* she would mean to hunt down.

She was there in the night, after the midnight chimes had struck from the single clock that still sounded them.

He heard her pass across the door, over and over, soft as the paw of a colossal cat, all its claws ensheathed—yet ready.

Under the door a faint rosiness bloomed, faded.

She tried him only once that night, and only for an hour. But he did not sleep again until daylight came.

The first day of his siege he began more earnest work for his own protection, taking out implements and charts from his second box in the cupboard.

Diligently he sacrificed a candle, puddling it down before making up its altered shape from the warm wax.

He undid one of the books, leaving one in place on the barricading chair, since drunk revelers had also come to beat on his door during the day. But the door anyway was enhanced by now through the High Art Andelm had learned. Nothing human at least could breach it.

She was active only at night. Of course, she was the hot dark of unreason, the red-blackness of shadowy ignorance and fear. And the second night he knew she would return. Return she did. Now in the silk stroking of the paw along the wood he heard the first delicate scraping of her claws. Her red light came and went, deep as crimson, pallid as a girl's watered lip-paste. He smelled her too. She did not have a mortal odor, not even female, maybe to his surprise. No, she smelled of fresh meat and wine and roses. She smelled of ginger and incense and a hot, hot iron; a *scorch.*

Most of the night she bothered him with her second visitation.

During it he wished he might have prayed. But he did not believe in God, or gods. He spoke chants only of alchemic teachings.

Near dawn she left off, and he sank asleep.

How long, he asked confusedly in his dreams, how long could he withstand her? But waking again, again he set to work, paring and finishing the wax and getting it as it must be. The replacing one book and taking up the other, he opened that too, breathing in its profound and fearsome lesson, its instructions written in a code ancient as the pyramids, of the Aegyptians.

Beyond the window, in the outer world, endless unpleasant and maddening sounds arose, but the smokes were now so dense

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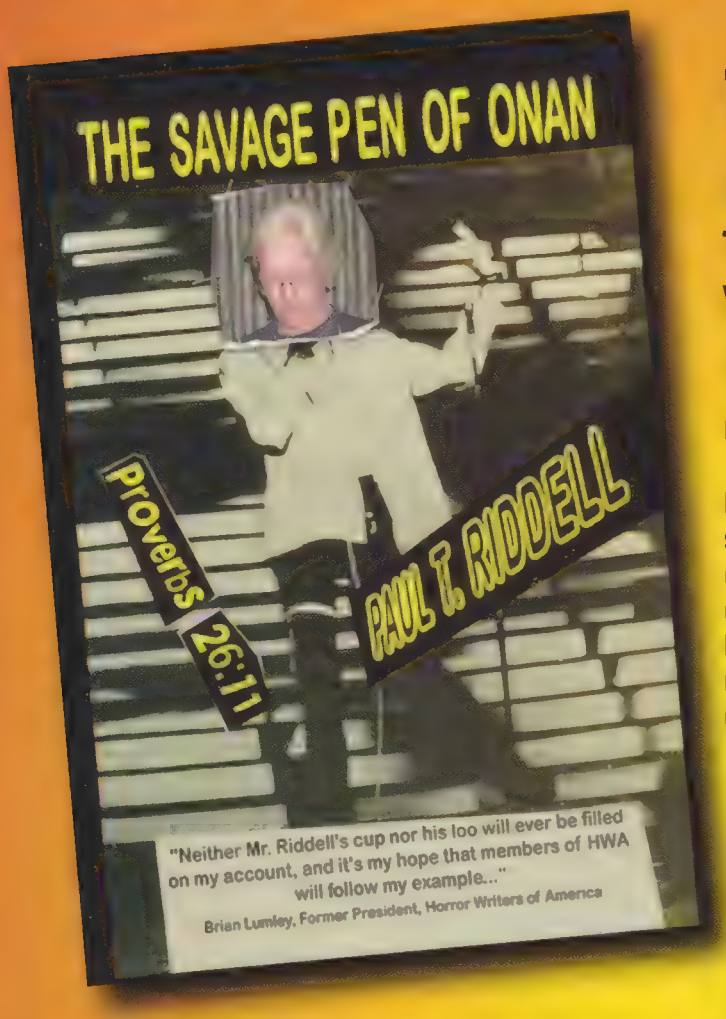
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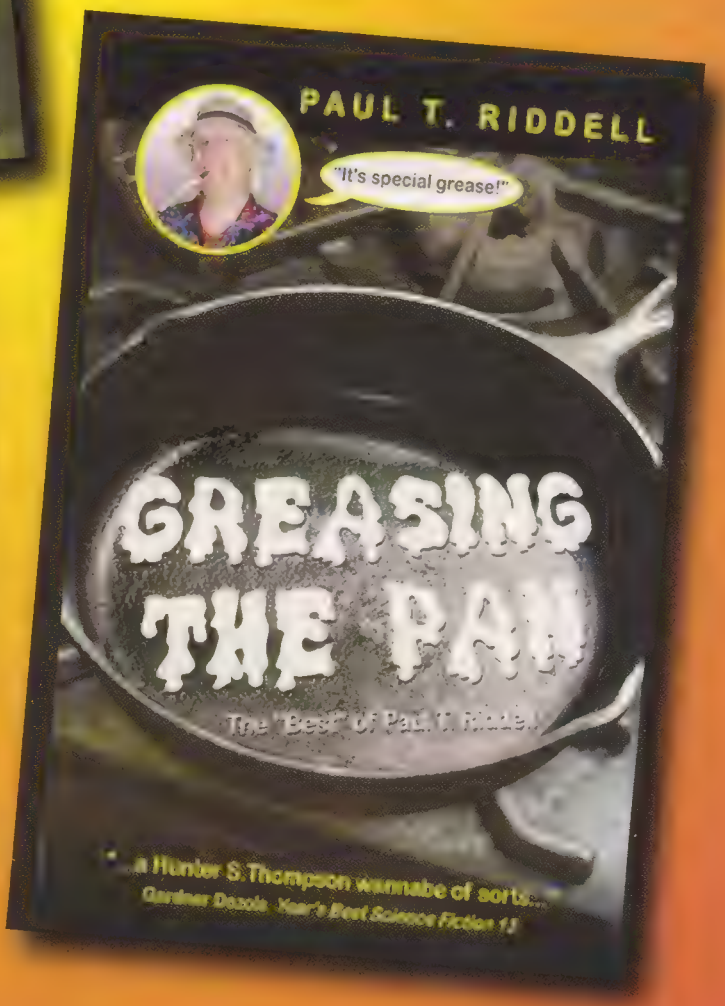
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that even morning was full twilight. In this murk only the occasional running torch might be seen. Finally, during the second day a group of such torches marched to the inn, and he heard the rumble of a corpse-cart coming near and stopping at the yard gate. Voices murmured, then wailed. Soon enough the cart went off again, and after this there was screaming and pleading. Then came the heavy blows as the doors of the Sun's Head were hammered shut and boarded. The sound of the plague sign scribbled there was too mild for him to pick out. When the torch-party too had gone, the outcry sank inside the inn.

Andelm wondered which of the Red Virgin's worshippers had succumbed after all to the disease, saddling all the rest with imprisonment here until they should die also. He pondered if any might survive. He considered if some would come to assault his door once again, now militantly, or if they had in this new extremity forgotten him. Certainly nobody came, and by the hour of sunset, when the smoldering city outside turned iron black as a coffin's interior (an example of which Andelm had once seen), all discernable human sounds hand ended in the building.

He had by then one finger's breadth of water and one swallow of ale, a fish of bread turning color as if itself sick, some cheese, no broth. But he could not leave the room.

She came at ten, when the church clock, for the first, did not chime.

The paw smote the wood and its claws raked. The timbers shook. The lock gave a shiver.

Andelm was standing on the floor inside his circle of salt and silver, chart to hand.

The paw smote the wood and its claws *raked*. The timbers shook. The lock gave a shiver.

Andelm roared arcane words and dashed lightning from one hand. It caught the tiny wax figure on the ground.

"Rise up, Kephyon, warrior and knight! Defend this fortress!"

And the wax figure, by those means invested with a surrogate life-force, *waxed* in size and ascended to the height of the door lintel.

Though made of a yellowish substance, now most like eldritch ivory, it had the form of a tall and mighty man, clad in armor, helmed, and armed with sword and pikestaff—these resembling metallic yellow amber.

Without another moment lost, the investrum passed straight through the closed door, which reformed behind it. From the corridor came immediate savage and uncanny notes of battle. The clang and slither of weapons, the oddest rhythmic guttural, a sort of snarling, so low and almost inaudible that no doubt only the psychic ear could note it. Sometimes the door was thrust against, inadvertently or in a fury. Under it a repulsive tangle of saffron and scarlet lights locked and relocked in combat.

Time seem altered. The night, as if afraid, fled over and away from the city and the inn. Hours chimed—not on the silenced clock—but on the skin of Andelm's mind.

In the last minutes before dawn the duality of colors under the door was changed. They melded to a hideous orange, and in that instant a long broad tear broke through the spellbound wood. Via this generous crack Andelm must watch then as his autometary vestrum Kephyon burst into a hundred pieces.

Andelm uttered a loud cry.

In that moment a flare of red gleamed over the inside of the door, as if a spray of blood had splashed it. But the blood seemed to be a mouth, which laughed at him. The he saw that the redness was the bloody reflection of the sun, lifting somberly from the smoke for a few seconds. Already the hour was midday. *She* had left him. And his guardian warrior Kephyon, modeled and summoned without fault, and according to antique lore, was vanquished entirely. Not even a trace of him remained, as Andelm could clearly see through the break in the door.

Next day he did not mean to sleep.

He opened once more the second book.

From this Andelm made his own chart, as in the past. He was assured that, in the fashioning and calling of Kephyon he had made no error. The unclean other power had simply proved too strong. What he must call on now therefor demanded from him not only meticulous labor, but an epitome of personal strength.

He used in its manufacture nothing so concrete as wax, but only ink from his ink-horn (fluidity), and the flame of a struck tinder (heat).

While the prior night had fled so fast, the day containing this venture seemed to expand. And he was bemusedly reminded of some episode in the Bible, to do with the staying of time by the extraordinary jurisdiction of the Biblical God, in whom Andelm himself had no faith.

Eventually exhaustion overcame Andelm. But he supposed by then he had completed his endeavors. So he indulged in two hours of sleep, his own discipline awaking him. He ate the last of his bread and cheese rind, and drank the last gulp of ale and water.

Below and all about him in the Sun's Head, he heard no noise at all, beyond the odd croaking of a beam as day cooked to noon. Or when a mouse, indifferent to plague, scurried busily through the walls. Andelm thought that all other persons there must now be deceased, or so approximate to death they were dumb, at least indecipherable. An awful pity did stir in him then, despite everything. He felt he might have mourned and wept for them at this ultimate juncture. But he had no space to give to it. He wiped his eyes on his bare arm, as a boy would have. And maybe he had *done* when a boy, turned so quickly from youthful things to momentous studies, which at that date were harsh, and all beyond him.

But, hardly perceptible in the black fog of smoke, the sun was going down.

Andelm roused, and made the circle of force upon the floor,

closing himself within. Then summoned with his Voice and his won blood, and the thin whistling of a slender reed pipe, his only other saviour: The Angel of Duskfall, Uzt.

The angel arrived in a rushing like a great storm of winds and rain. It entered the chamber from out of the invisible air, which was seen briefly to rip wide as a torn sail. In color the entity was a deep violet-blue.

Andelm stood and confronted the angel. It has less the face of a man than of a lion, and was maned with blue flames that writhed and crackled. Where the vestrum Kephyron had been tall as the upper limit of the door, the head of the Angel Uzt reached nearly to the ceiling. Behind its robed and towering form, which like the mane, also sinuously writhed as fire would, four wings stirred and shimmered, the feathers of them like those of a blue phoenix. It seemed angry and already prepared for war. A glittering sword was gripped in each many-fingered hand. Its eyes, smoothly blue-blank as stones,also shot off sword-edge sparks.

"Greeting, Uzt," said Andelm, for the angel must be acknowledged.

"I am primed," Uzt answered, in a voice of tempest. "Why, and for what?"

"She approaches."

This was sure enough. *She* even now smeared her forecasting scarlet taint through the door's unmended crack. (Andelm had know to attempt repairing the door would be redundant. Once she had breached the way on the third night, she would be quite able to penetrate his chamber on her return, mend or spell it as he might.)

So she did, and instantly.

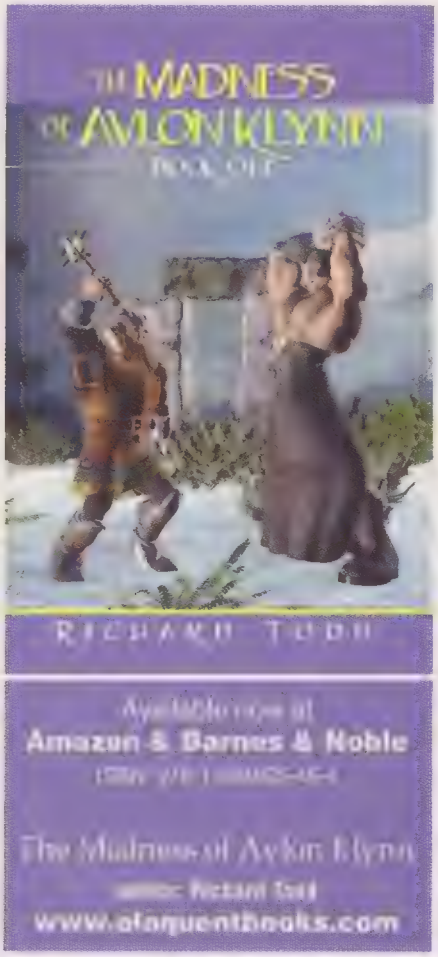
Even as the Angel of Dusk raised both swords, the bloody deluge of the Red Virgin gushed into the room, smashing the rest of the door's timbers as it came.

The chamber reeled as opposing forces clashed.

Galvanics and thunder-bolts sizzled and exploded. Splinters showered out from the wood of beams and furnishings, plasters from the walls. The floor itself appeared to be erupting, as if the earth quaked. indeed panes of the very world seemed to have shattered and now to cascade through space. The surges of atmosphere stung like vipers. Meanwhile the brightest and blindest flashes of light alternated with abysmal blinks of pure blackness. Between could be glimpsed insane wrestlings of crimson and scarlet with the beating of indigo blades and wings.

The uproar was so vast, Andelm believed he must go deaf. He fell to his knees inside the circle, aware that only its power would protect him from the battle. (But even as he knelt there he beheld how little sections of the circle were flaking off, dissolving like bread touched with acid.)

The terminating moment came. Blue and red burned up as one, immovable even among the back and white lashes of vision. And Andelm saw how both colors wooed, then wed each other. They fused, inseparable, changing abruptly to the extravagant purple of ancient Tyre, for which Caesars had contended. *Something*, now colorless and screeching, detached itself, and was loosed



upward like an arrow—was gone. After this, all color died, and dimness began. After *this*, a silence.

Not deaf or blinded despite the onslaught, Andelm stared through the clearing stasis of the room. And saw what stood there now, the victor, less than thirteen paces from him. It was she. O course. Uzt she had routed, at least the configuration of him. The angel was gone, and piece by piece instead her corrupting light spilled throughout the chamber.

All was glowing. All was red. She had won.

Although grown in size, she looked to him, as no doubt she must, exactly like the statue of old Tibar had rough-carved—unfinished and grotesque, ugly and omniscient. He eyes spangled and her mouth grinned, and over her lascivious robe her raw spice hair trickled like serpents.

He had, Andelm, no further defense, nor any strength left to attempt it, nor any time to activate it even had vigor and skill allowed.

For she was here. She was, though motionless, nine paces from him, seven paces, and now four—the number of the nights he had held out against her.

She did not speak. She *breathed* on him. Her breath hurt and shamed him. It said: Now worship me for you may have no other god.

He understood, had always done so, that she meant to be his death. And it was to happen, and to be now, though he had never thought to die in such a way, nor so young, his true power unlearned and work undone. But there was no help. No rescue. She would put here carapace against his human one, and like all others he would be destroyed. By the flesh, the grossness and futility of life—and thus by the plague, fever, agony, and extinction.

Andelm shuddered. Humiliated and in despair, he bowed his head.

Sun, stand thou still ... and thou, Moon ... And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed ... So the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and hasted not to go down about a whole day.

It was Yezua who had done this, Yezua praying only to his God.

How curious the idea should come to Andelm now, even some of the words from th Bible which outlined the event. Evidently, Yezua's God, then, had stopped time, letting it continue only for Yezua's army and the army of those he fought—inside some kind of impervious bubble.

But what had this to do with Andelm?

And what had that other thing to do with him either, that peculiar shadow which was growing there upon the floor. *She* did not cast it for she had none, and *he* did not cast it certainly, for it was of something standing upright behind him.

Andelm could not move to look about and see. He had become a block of stone, but stone not blind or deaf. He saw that the shadow was not dark, indeed had no color in it of any sort. And yet it was very definitely there on the floor, stretching out and out, as if the shape had been cut from *time itself*, and this shape, robed and hooded and slender and huge, held in its right hand, even supposing it possessed a hand to hold anything, a wide and curving sickle, like the crescent, maybe, of a moon that stood still, or a quartered, still-standing sun.

He had no notion, Andelm the student of alchemic mysteries, what this creature was. And he could not even raise his eyes from its shadow to see what *she* would do—or could she not see it, as he himself could not actually *turn* to do?

But the being which cast the timeless shadow spoke.

It had a voice, needless to relate, that was not to be heard. And every syllable sounded loud as trumpets, soft as a sigh, vivid as molten glass.

"Now is not his hour."

This was what the voice said.

"He is to live into his eighty-ninth year, the third month of it, the fifth day of that month, the twentieth hour of that day, and only then to die, replete with long life and famous among men. Not until then can any form of dying have sovereignty over him, and then only *I* shall have it, for then, then only, may I claim him. But soon or late, all yield to me. Even gods, even God perhaps, at Eternity's ending. Even *I*, myself last of all lasts, must yield, to *me*."

Andelm's head, without his volition, snapped up and he beheld the face of the Red Virgin, transfixed in a mindless terror of its own. But over Andelm's head, so close he felt the hissing flight of it, the great scythe passed with its sharpest sickle edge. It clove the body of the demon in half, and she fell in two portions—that vanished in foul-smelling nothingness before ever they reached the ground.

The shadow had already disappeared.

Nothing was there then but for the damaged room, the silent inn, the city outside where rain was falling, flattening the smokes, and a single bell rang in a far off church. And the young student, well-favored and pale, who got up from the floor and looked about him once only, knowing now he would survive and prosper, through all calamity and against all odds ....

But also knowing the Year, the Month, the Day, the *Hour* of his death.

Notes:

1. There really was a belief (at least in Shakespearian England) that wearing red etc. could protect from the bubonic plague. (The setting of this story, however, is somewhere on the European mainland.)
2. The Biblical reference and quote are from the Old Testament Book of Joshua (Yezua in the story), Ch. 10, V:12-15.

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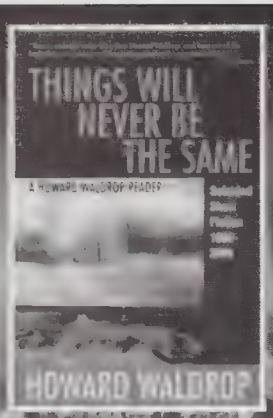

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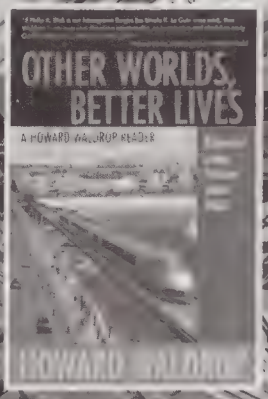

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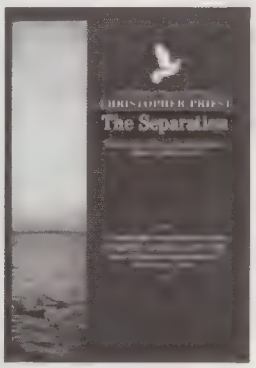

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When two hearts beat as one, there's no rule that says both of them have to be human.

Healing Benjamin

By Dennis Danvers
Illustration by Eric Westbrook

There is something in the unselfish and self-sacrificing love of a brute, which goes directly to the heart of him who has had frequent occasion to test the paltry friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere Man.

—Edgar Allan Poe, "The Black Cat"

I got the healing touch when I was 16 years old kneeling over my dying cat Benjamin in my bedroom. He was trying to crawl under the bed to die, but I wouldn't let him, hauling him out and wrapping my body around him, my forehead pressed against his. He was a year older than me. He'd been there my whole life. I couldn't imagine life without him. He stopped breathing, his heart stopped, and I prayed for him, though I rarely prayed then, and I never pray now, squeezing him, imprinting my will on him, picturing him raised from the dead, alive and well. I didn't know what else to do, sobbing, absolutely heartbroken, torturing myself with Joan Baez singing "Old Blue" on the stereo:

… Old Blue died and he died so hard
Shook the ground in my backyard
Dug his grave with a silver spade
Lowered him down with links of chain
Every link I did call his name
Here Blue, you good dog you
Here Blue, I'm a-coming there too!

Benjamin stirred under my hands, his heart beating hard and steady against my palm. I released him, and he rose and walked to the door, his tail erect. He wanted to go out. An hour later, he wanted back in, and he was hungry. He looked good. He looked real good.

I took him to a vet after his healing to get him checked out. I didn't take him to his regular vet, Dr. Diderada, who Ben had been going to since he was a kitten, figuring he'd never believe this was the same half-blind stiff-legged neutered tom living on borrowed time he'd basically given up on a week before. I told this new vet Ben was a stray I was adopting, and he guessed him to be about four, in perfect health. All the vets over the years guessed him to be about four, in perfect health. That's 28 in cat years, not a bad year for me. Benjamin seemingly picked an age he liked and stuck with it. I, meanwhile, kept getting older. I quit taking him to the vet years ago, having exhausted all the convenient ones. Ben was over it, and I couldn't see spending the money to be reassured semiannually that my cat was immortal. He never even had an ear mite or a flea, as if even the insect world knew he was operating under a special dispensation.

Thirty years later, I was 46, and I still had Benjamin. I'll do the math for you. He was 47. That's 329 in cat years. Even if you gave him nine lives, that made each one more than 36 years. No. Benjamin was not a normal cat.

Back when Ben was 17, my parents readily believed Dr. Diderada had resurrected him with some good vitamin supplements. They were wish-upon-a-star, somewhere-over-the-rainbow kind of people, but even they wouldn't believe a 47-year-old cat. After I left home, I didn't see them on my own turf very often, but I always lied and said Ben was a new cat. They thought I was odd for naming every cat Benjamin, but they already knew I was odd—I was their son. It helped that Ben was a fairly generic gray tabby with white boots and a nondescript meow. My ex-wife Penny knew Ben for seven years, living with him for five, but she never noticed he never aged. She wasn't

a cat person. She wasn't any kind of animal person I ever discovered. She liked watching monkeys in the monkey house, but that's not the same, is it? I know it sounds weird, but that's one of the reasons we broke up. I just couldn't be with somebody who didn't like animals. When it came down to it, she didn't like people all that much. Which makes sense—people are animals, smart worrisome animals, but still animals.

Anyway, she peacefully coexisted with Ben, and he was never an issue. I never dated anyone else more than a year or so, and nobody who spent much time around Ben. Then at 46, I started going out with Shannon. That didn't last long—the just going out. Our third date started Friday at four—she took off work an hour early—and ended Tuesday at noon. I told Benjamin it was the closest to a resurrection I'd experienced in my life, and maybe it would help me understand him better. He pointed out, however, that death was a necessary precondition of resurrection. He played dead and sprang back to life, a favorite trick of his, flicking his smartass tail. I've always talked to Ben. He hasn't always answered.

For some time, Shannon and I had been practically living together, shuttling back and forth between our houses, but she preferred my place because Benjamin lived there. Benny Boy, as she called him. If he'd been a man, I would've been insanely jealous. To say they hit it off is to say Juliet was sort of into Romeo. He was equally passionate about her.

This was all good. She loved me too, Benny Boy's lifelong companion and confidante, the cleaner of the cat box, the keeper of the can opener, not to mention healer extraordinaire. But then she started asking questions. "Isn't he due for a checkup? Shots or something?"

I made the mistake of just putting her off, and then she saw a little reminder card from one of Benny Boy's many vets in my mail, this one saying he was at least eight years overdue on just about everything. So she called and made an appointment. That's kind of how Shannon was, which was one of the many things I liked about her, except insofar as it pertained to Benjamin, because I'd always figured that sooner or later reality was going to catch up with me. It was like I made a deal all those years ago that I couldn't handle my cat dying right then, but Some Day there'd be no choice, and it would hurt even worse when it finally came. But somehow, if I could just keep his death and persistent life a secret, nothing had to change.

"How old is he?" Shannon asked when they met. About four, I said, never anticipating I'd be caught in my convenient lie. So how could he be eight years behind in his shots? I feared every step I took down this road with Shannon meant Some Day was coming soon. But I couldn't stop myself. I couldn't stop her. Benjamin, closed up in his carrier, in his stoic, dignified way, neither stopped nor started, but was carried along by the tide of events—and by his carrier of course—to the vet.

Ben enjoyed crowded veterinary waiting rooms, the more crowded the better. He delighted in the spectacle. This day, there was a special treat, a harlequin Great Dane lurching about out of control, his suited keeper helpless to stop him from sticking his great nose in the random crotch, body-blocking anyone coming in the door, terrifying every animal in the place—and I'm including humans as animals—except Ben who watched from inside his carrier, purring, purring, the deep rumbling purr I know as laughter. Ben enjoyed watching foolishness. He saw a lot of it at his age.

"He's so calm," Shannon marveled, peering inside his carrier, stroking his untroubled brow with her finger, keeping a wary eye on the Dane. "Is he always this calm?"

"Oh yes," I reassured her, and then we were next, and she wanted to go in too, and how could I refuse?

After a lengthy examination, the vet, a kind, fatherly gentleman, maybe a decade older than Ben chronologically, but a mere child in cat years, broached the subject cautiously. He looked over the end of his reading glasses, up from Ben's near-empty record of perfect health. "According to our records, I last examined Benjamin 12 years ago?"

I couldn't lie, not with Shannon beside us scratching Ben's head with both hands the way he likes, waiting for my answer. "Yes."

"Which makes Ben"—he looked back at the record—"19?" He couldn't quite keep the incredulity out of his gentlemanly voice. Shannon's hands froze on Ben's noble head. All eyes were on me. Even Ben's.

Ben and I had liked this guy, so we stuck with him for three years. The math checked out. He was the last. Ben was 35, ready to do without vets—the shots and the thermometer up his ass anyway. He found the rest interesting. At least I wasn't dealing with Ben's first vet. No bluff possible there. "That's right," I said.

"Would— Would you mind leaving Ben for a few tests? An hour or so? No charge, of course."

Ben gave me an unmistakable look. No fucking way is a precise translation. "I'm afraid not," I said.

"Why not?" Shannon asked. She'd done a little math of her own. In her reality, Ben was six, tops, and of course, he looked four, as always.

"Nothing's wrong with him, right?" I asked the vet.

He shook his head no. "Quite the opposite. He's the healthiest cat I'll see this year. This is the same cat?"

I considered lying, but couldn't imagine explaining the lie to Shannon in some way that wouldn't sound sick or pathetic. "Yes. Same cat."

"He's the healthiest 19-year-old cat I've ever seen—and we don't see that many. There aren't even any tartar deposits on his teeth." He bared Ben's teeth, pointing with a ball point pen at the gleaming fangs, an indignity Ben graciously endured.

"I know. I think he's had enough for one day." Ben chimed in with a low moan, that if you know anything about cats means his patience is spent, and you're in immediate peril from the aforementioned fangs and the hooked razors that sprout from each paw on demand, the envy of every badass who ever lived. The vet got the message immediately, putting him back in the carrier with a fistful of treats.

Thirty years later, I was 46, and I still had Benjamin. I'll do the math for you. He was 47. That's 329 in cat years.

I wasn't looking forward to the ride home. No well-timed moan was going to get me out of this one.

There was a moment, when Shannon was already in the car and I was about to put Ben in the backseat, when we were alone. I put his carrier on the roof of the car and pretended I was having trouble finding my keys, though I didn't think Shannon was paying any attention to us. She was staring out the windshield with a determined look on her face. Ben and I spoke in low tones through the bars of his carrier door, our faces inches apart. The traffic flowed by behind me, ignoring me and my cat.

"What do I do?" I asked. "She'll never believe you're 19."

"Tell her my real age," he said.

"You think?"

"I know."

"But I can't prove you're 47. She'll never believe me."

"Proof doesn't matter. You'll see. She senses I'm no ordinary cat. We have a special bond."

"Oh please. Does she sense you're a manipulative little eunuch?"

"For a cat, I'm not so little." He laughed at his own joke Cat humor, very sly.

I put him in the middle of the backseat, so he could see out the front like he likes, got in, immediately started the car, and put it in gear.

"How can Ben be 19?" Shannon asked.

We were parallel parked, my eyes glued to the side mirror, waiting for a break in the traffic. Following Ben's advice—I'd never known him to be wrong—I told her. "He's not," I began, "he's 47." I pulled into traffic.

There were certain advantages to telling the tale while driving. I wasn't expected to make eye contact; a brisk, even telegraphic style was perfectly acceptable; and she wasn't inclined to interrupt, argue, or question while I was waiting to make a tricky left turn across a steady torrent of oncoming traffic. The downside was I didn't have a clue how she was taking it until we were back at my place, and I turned off the engine and looked over at her. You might think she would've refused to believe me, end of story, but Shannon wasn't like that. Neither was she some wacko flake who believed any madness I spouted just because she loved me.

"Okay," she said. "I want to figure this thing out." She turned to Ben and looked at him through the bars. Has Benny Boy been keeping secrets from his Shannon? He looked right back. Hell. What did I know? Maybe they did have a special bond.

It was early yet, and Shannon had me dig out Ben's vet records, and while I was making breakfast, she called every vet he'd ever been to. The second one was dead and gone, the third seemed to have left town. She made appointments with the rest, booking Ben solid for the day. I wondered if he figured on this when he told me to tell her the truth. I certainly hadn't. I checked my credit card balance, and we were off.

I got pretty good at telling the story economically. I left out any mention of prayer as such—there were no priests on our itinerary, only men of science. It was amazing how many incredulous vets remembered Ben. It was the no tartar thing that seemed to impress them most. All of them, however, dismissed immediately the possibility of a 47-year-old cat and denied there was any way he could be the same cat despite the resemblance. One guy got pissed off, like I had something to gain by paying an exorbitant fee for ten minutes of his time to tell him a story I knew he'd never believe. Was he an idiot? Couldn't he see I was doing it for love? Most of the vets were nice, cutting looks at Shannon—Are you crazy too? Shouldn't you be getting him help? Shannon just wanted the facts. She examined the records of Ben's perfect checkups with care, except the pissed-off guy's; he threw us out before she got the chance.

Ben's first and favorite vet, Dr. Diderada, interestingly enough, seemed to come closest to believing my story. He was last on Shannon's itinerary. He probably should've retired years earlier. He had a distracted, dreamy quality, like an old cat. He gave us pretty much the same lecture the others had—why it was impossible for a cat to be 47—and certainly not one in Ben's condition. But this time there was something quixotic about the narrative, some sense that among all the dead and dying cats there might be one who lived forever and never grew old, but of course, you couldn't expect a scientific professional to speak openly of such a creature.

He bent down, looking Ben in the eye, scratching Ben's trembling chin with his index finger, in a beckoning motion, as if he hoped to lure the true cat out into the open. "Some cats are special, aren't they Benjamin? The world is their oyster." The combination of the chin scratch and the mention of oysters—one of Ben's favorites, especially fried—proved irresistibly seductive, and a resonant rumble issued forth from deep inside him so intense it made the gleaming examining table hum like a struck tuning fork, and both Diderada and Ben smiled like the Buddha. The walls behind them were plastered with lurid posters of cat anatomy, the color of rare roast beef. A plastic cat skeleton on a stand smiled too.

Shannon turned away, whispering, "I'll wait in the car," and hurried out.

"Lovely woman," Diderada said.

Last stop on Shannon's fact-finding expedition was a visit to my folks, the only witnesses to Ben's resurrection I knew how to contact. Any angels who may or may not have been in attendance had steadfastly refused to reveal themselves over the years, and my official policy toward them was blissful ignorance. I managed a cranky ignorance most of the time. I never achieved blissful, though I avoided, for the most part, totally pissed off. Still no angels, no answers. I loved living with Ben, but I didn't like living with an unfathomable enigma.

Mom and Dad loved Shannon, of course, and didn't mind at all that she'd called that morning to invite us to dinner. They were also quite delighted to see Benjamin. After their last cat Angelina died at 16—toothless, blind, and with daily IVs—they'd decided to forego cats indefinitely, but they missed having a feline presence about the house.

As I mentioned before, my parents weren't into grappling with reality. They slept under a pyramid and wanted to believe that breathing exercises and dietary supplements and the well-placed crystal would keep them forever young, though down deep they knew better. As much as they liked to flirt with the flaky, they proved immediately resistant to the notion that this Benjamin was the same cat who moved out almost 30 years previously. Metaphorically, spiritually, teleported, time-warped, reincarnated, alien-abducted, cloned, whatever the hell, maybe; but not literally the same cat living his life ever since, one day at a time, a few months past his 47th birthday. That would be crazy.

Ben, who'd had a half-dozen thermometers shoved up his ass already that day, was not overly invested in the proceedings until dessert. He rubbed up against Mom's legs while she was whipping cream, and when she was done, he stood on his hind legs, his forepaws extended in supplication, and "danced" (an awkward stumbling turn from the usually graceful Ben) and she gave him the beaters. I pointed out they used to go through this identical ritual when I was a kid—Ben got both damn beaters then too—but Mom insisted it didn't prove anything, that any cat would do the same.

Shannon maintained an aloof silence during all of this, only asking an occasional question, clarifying some detail, never venturing an opinion herself. Over dessert, Mom suggested a therapist she knew. "I went," Dad said. "I had suicidal thoughts." He popped a strawberry in his mouth. "Not anymore!"

He told us about his "crisis"—which as far as I could tell consisted of realizing that we all grow old and die. He acted like this would be news to us young people, though he was the one who said, "You're only as old as you feel, right?" Wrong. Clearly the man had forgotten Angelina Dad now took antidepressants to make him feel good, guzzled various mood-altering teas Mom bought from websites, and he felt like a new man. I kind of missed the days Dad smoked pot in the basement and thought I didn't know, while I experimented widely. I'd often speculated that some bizarre conjunction of chemicals in my body expressed in my breath and tears might have affected Ben in some inexplicable way to resurrect him. Might as well believe in fairy dust. God's will? Divine Plan? Come on. He's a cat. And if he had a mission on this earth other than enjoying himself with the least possible bother, God failed to inform him of it. Go forth and lick both beaters, my chosen one. I didn't think so.

"Maybe you're supposed to be figuring it out for me, Jeffrey," Ben said once. "You're the one who cares about this religious crap." It was true, but I couldn't figure it out. What possible use could God have for a cat who had so little use for Him? I've always wanted to believe but never quite pulled it off except for transitory spasms of awe—what most people call agnosticism. If Ben made God more likely, he also made it more likely that He's totally batshit nuts. Give me agnosticism any day. And if I wanted something to believe in, my folks always had something new on offer. This time it was some mini-messianic therapist with a nimble prescription pad. My folks were almost becoming conventional.

Shannon was no more interested in hearing about Dad's rebirth than I was, so we didn't linger after dessert. At the door, Mom put the therapist's number in my shirt pocket and gave it a little pat. I couldn't begin to describe how swell that felt at my age.

Shannon asked one more time, holding him up as Exhibit A, snoozing in his carrier, his face and forepaws sodden from the post-whipped-cream cleaning he'd given himself, "But this does look exactly like the Benjamin you remember, right?"

"Yes Dear," Mom said. "But it can't be, can it?" She gave my shirt pocket another pat to let Shannon know she held her responsible for getting her crazy son to a therapist as soon as possible. I would sooner have gone to Dr. Diderada than any therapist my parents would've recommended.

Shannon was silent all the way home to my place, staring out the window at the night streets like she was a stranger in town feeling homesick. Every once in a while something would snag her vision, and she'd turn and follow it like she'd never seen it before.

I could only imagine what was going through her mind. How did you keep sleeping with a guy who thinks his cat is immortal? How did you let him rub your feet, make you breakfast, adore you, write you bad poetry, without doing something once the miraculous cat was out of the bag? Flee, fix it, lock me up, something. She loved me, loved my cat, even claimed to like my parents. But did she sign on for me being flat-out crazy? I couldn't imagine so.

I halfway expected her to say she was going to get in her car and drive home, sleep at her place tonight, think things over, dump me tomorrow. Not Shannon.

When we were inside with Ben, she kicked off her shoes, pulled him out of his carrier, and cradled him in her arms, nuzzling his face. She put her whole body into it. It was kind of erotic, actually. "Benny Boy, I wish you could talk," she said. He just purred like there might be something to this only-as-old-as-you-feel thing. Then she set him down and watched adoringly as he sauntered down the hall to the bed where he slept every night and half the day.

She poured herself a glass of wine. "Want one?"

"Sure."

She poured. A lot. She drank. "I believe you," she said. "I can't see you having some weird serial cat fetish. Showing up at all those different vets with different cats over a twenty year period is just too strange—and for what? So you could convince me now? It has to be the same cat. It has to be Ben. It's the only thing that makes any sense. Dr. Diderada thought so. Don't you think?"

I couldn't believe Ben was right again. I shook my head in wonder. "I did. He said he didn't, but there was something … It was like no time had passed. I was five, I think, the first time I remember seeing Diderada with Ben. He gave me a lollipop when he gave Ben his treat, but Mom wouldn't let me eat it. Sugar was poison."

"I bet you were adorable."

"I was afraid you'd think I was crazy. I'd think I was crazy if

I hadn't been there."

She laughed, shaking her head. "It was a miracle. A blessing." She looked me in the eye. "Have you ever tried— You know—"

"No. No way Once was enough. Once has been more than sufficiently weird enough. I couldn't deal with it. At first I tried to convince myself it wasn't Ben who came back that night, but even if an identical cat who acted just like him showed up then, he'd still be 30—210 in cat years."

She made a face, unhooked her bra, and pulled it out her sleeve. She hung it on a chair back. "I thought they changed that. That because of medical advances, it's more like five to one."

"150 then. Looks 20. What's the difference? He doesn't age. I can't explain it."

"So he's just stayed exactly the same all these years?"

"Not exactly. He looks the same, but he changes, experiences new things, learns..." I almost said evolves, but I stopped myself. I'd said too much already.

"Like what?" She poured more wine for herself. I hadn't touched mine.

"Uh. Just things in general."

"Give me an example. One thing he does now he didn't do when he was 17."

There were dozens of simple things I could've recounted, but I couldn't think of a single one of them. They were all blotted out by the enormous eclipsing mass of what I didn't want to say: He talks. Would I then go on to explain he's fluent in English, speaking softly, in a half-whisper, like a breathy purr. Not really built for speech, it took him awhile to perfect his technique. He understood what I said long before he talked back.

Would I go on to explain he reads voluminously, has a passion for discussing politics, and expresses his political opinions in unique ways, like pissing and shitting on every Hummer foolish enough to park on our block.

Should I then tell her the first time he met her he told me, "She's the one for you, Jeffrey"? That would've been way too Son of Sam, don't you think? Ben suggested from the beginning, and I'd always agreed with him, that any mention of his linguistic abilities to anyone would be a very bad idea, and he'd never spoken clearly in the presence of others except for a stray word or two, easily explained away as a fluke. He was convinced if word ever got out he could talk, he'd be jailed for all eternity or until they finally carved him up to discover his secrets. He's always had a flair for the melodramatic, but I'm afraid he was right on this one. But how could I not tell her? At that moment, Ben walked back into the kitchen. He gave me the look, the same look he gave me when Dr. Whatsit who started all this with his frigging reminder card wanted to do tests.

"He tells me when his box needs changing," I offered. "He has a— a special meow."

She picked up Ben and cuddled with him. "Is that right, Benny Boy? To what do we owe the honor of your company?" She looked over his purring head at me. "I just realized. You've lived your whole life with him." I wasn't sure what all she meant by that, or what it might mean to her, nor did she care to elaborate. "I'm going to bed now." I followed her into the bedroom She put Ben in his usual place, stepped out of her jeans and left them lying on the floor, pulled back the covers and crawled into bed beside him. She was asleep in moments, the two of them breathing in unison.

I got into bed on Ben's other side.

When I turned off the light, he scolded me in a soft sing-song, "You almost told her."

"Oh fuck yourself, Ben."

"Neutered, re-mem-berrrr?" He chuckled softly, enjoying his own humor, enjoying his endless life.

I lay awake listening to them snore together like an old married couple, wondering how these revelations were going to affect our lives, then drifted off. I dreamed Shannon was in a terrible accident, and I healed her, but when she woke up, she no longer spoke, not a word, and she blamed me. You could see it in her eyes, lonely and furious and afraid.

In the morning, Shannon came right to the point. "Jeffrey," she said. "Would you help Aubrey?"

Ben, returning from a crunching good time at the cat food bowl, jumped onto the sofa, and flicked his tail—Careful.

Shannon's younger brother Aubrey was in a car wreck five years earlier at the conclusion of a high-speed chase involving drugs—both in his person and in the trunk of the car—and he'd been in a persistent coma ever since. Until that moment, he was a mere fact of her existence from before I knew her, like the name of her childhood dog or where she went to high school. She never went to see him. He was as good as dead. There'd be no point. Not until now. Now there'd be a point. "You mean—"

"Heal him. Like you did Benjamin."

"I didn't do anything to Benjamin. It was just a weird one-time thing."

"How do you know? You've never tried to do it again. I can't believe you've never tried to do it again."

There was a light in her eyes that made me uncomfortable. This wasn't just about Aubrey, who everyone in her family pretty much agreed was an obnoxious little shit whose final, completely typical screw-up was not to have the good sense to die when he had the chance. "Believe it. Listen Shannon, I think this is a really bad idea."

"But this is my brother. You could save him. I know you could."

"Let me think about it, okay? I have to think about it."

"Okay. How long do you need?"

Some counselor once told impatient Shannon it was okay to ask for clear time limits—deadlines—if it would help her wait more patiently. I'd gotten used to it. She was much more patient with a deadline than without. But this was different. I hadn't been able to figure this thing out in 30 years—how it happened, why it happened, how I felt about it, anything at all—and she wanted to know how long I needed? Longer than I had obviously. "Tomorrow. Tomorrow night after dinner. I'll cook. I have a Rachael Ray recipe I want to try with that chicken."

"You sure it's still okay? It's been in there a while."

"I just bought it a couple of days ago. It'll be fine."

"You don't think I'm being selfish for asking you to help Aubrey?"

"Not at all. How could asking to help somebody else be selfish?"

"If I wasn't thinking about how it might be hard for you. I don't want you to do anything you don't want to do, Jeffrey. I love you. You know that?"

"Absolutely."

"Okay then. Tomorrow after dinner." She sipped her coffee. "So you watch Rachael Ray every day?"

"She's on when I break for lunch. What can I say? She's hot. You're going to love this chicken."

To tell you the truth, I couldn't remember Rachael Ray's recipe exactly, but it involved some chopped herbs and garlic and olive oil slathered on chicken parts which were then baked. I recalled the close-up of Rachael Ray's hands slathering breasts and thighs. She was always using her hands. I loved it. I'm a whole bird man myself, but I liked the concept. I figured baked was good, so I wouldn't be standing over the stove while we were having this discussion. I didn't expect Shannon to wait until after dinner to bring it up. My tarragon plants looked like they were up to a chicken-size harvest, and I threw in a little white wine, some chopped mushrooms, a dash of nutmeg, some salt, lots of black pepper and crushed garlic, and (of course) extra virgin olive oil. It made a fine green goop.

I'd decided to say no to Shannon's request that I attempt to resurrect Aubrey. Here was my reasoning: Most important, I suppose, was my gut said no. This was no surprise. It'd been saying no loud and clear for 30 years now—no wavering. But with Shannon's petition, I'd been forced to rationally examine what I thought about it—in other words, to come up with some likely sounding reasons to validate my gut. If your mind doesn't work like that, more power to you, and hurray for rationalism and all of that, but for me reason lives to serve the gut. In this case, it was persuasive as usual.

First, I doubted I could do it. When Ben came back to life, I really wanted it to happen. I'd never willed anything so strongly before or since. As for Aubrey, I could try to want his resurrection because Shannon did—though she seemed to have gotten along fine without him in the time I'd known her—but it wasn't happening. Deep down, I felt if Aubrey were going to make a move, it should be in the other direction. So if my will and desire had anything to do with whatever process brought Ben back to life, there was little chance of success with Aubrey.

Assuming I was able to bring him back to life, the questions just began. Ben regressed from being a dying seventeen-year-old to (by all appearances) a four-year-old, and had remained unchanged for 30 years and counting. Would Aubrey, who had his accident at 26, find himself a permanent six-year-old? What effect would five years of unconsciousness have had on him? And as Ben pointed out, death is a necessary precondition of resurrection. Technically speaking, Aubrey wasn't dead. He was in that huge gray arena known as, "as good as dead." Even my silly father had casually described himself thus over dessert the previous night—but there's no such thing, is there? A prescription and some psycho-babble away from a cure isn't dead. Nothing's as good as dead. Dead is unique, no known therapy or cure.

But let's just say, everything were to go perfectly. Aubrey awakens from his deep sleep a new man of sound mental faculties who lives a long fruitful life and dies at a respectable age like the rest of us, a credit to his species, despite his previous sociopathic tendencies, having seen the light or whatever revelation the resurrected are privy to, and has been utterly transformed by the experience. Did I really want to be the guy who raised him from the dead? I wouldn't make it out of the hospital before they'd be doing tests on me, driving me out to the cemetery to see what I could really do. No thanks.

I didn't know why Ben came back to life and continued to live. I hadn't a clue. Until I figured that out, that's as far as it went. God might have a plan, in which case I was sure I couldn't do anything to screw it up, lacking any clear instructions otherwise, but if God had no plan, I didn't feel obliged to come up with one other than the status quo: Everyone dies. That's the way things are. Except for Ben.

Would I get a chance to say all this to Shannon after she hears no? Would it matter to her? Would I lose her? That's all I cared about: I just didn't want to lose her. I knew I should care about her brother, but to me he was an extra out of an old movie with Genevieve Bujold. I couldn't bear to lose Shannon, however. As Ben prophesied, she was the one for me. Trouble was, she had just one tiny little favor to ask, and I couldn't do it.

And there she was, coming in the kitchen door with a bottle of wine, a half hour early, as I should've known she would be, and here I was with my hands dripping garlic, olive oil, and tarragon, anointing the chicken inside and out, lost in thought, reasoning and seasoning. If I could only manage to throw the bird in the oven before Shannon rushed straight to The Issue, we could talk while it baked.

She kissed my cheek, careful to avoid my slathered hands, and opened the bottle of wine, giving a half-hearted account of her day. Traffic was lighter than usual, she claimed, to explain her early arrival. I pretended to believe her.

Ben, who'd shown up to observe the preparations the minute I took the chicken out of the fridge, didn't even glance her way. He was seated on a stool, eye level with his share of the bounty, the bag of innards I always gave him—liver, heart, gizzard—laid out on the cutting board awaiting preparation once the bird was in the oven. He liked them sautéed in butter and garlic with a splash of Worcestershire, devoured them like a lion on the veldt, if the lion had a chef. I kept the neck for making stock. I didn't treat him to such delicacies often. He liked the Chow, he claimed. "I think they put something in it," he said. "It's highly addictive. Perhaps some extract of cat nip." Ben's always had a serious nip habit, but we all must have our vices, I suppose.

Shannon poured, laughing at Ben's rapt attention to my labors. She scratched the top of his head, and he lifted it to press against her hand, arched his back to her touch, as her hand glided firmly down his back, but his eyes never left the prize. "I hope you washed your hands," Shannon said. She held my glass to my lips to give me a sip of wine, careful once again to avoid my glistening green hands and the oily bird. "I'll put your glass over here." She set it on the counter out of the way and took the stool next to Ben's. "So have you thought about Aubrey?"

Damn. "Of course. Let me get this in the oven first, okay? Then we can talk."

"Okay." She idly petted Ben a few strokes, growing pensive. She wrapped her hand around his tail, and he slowly pulled it through, like a napkin through a ring. "It must not be yes. If it was yes, you'd

Ben was covered in green goop, as was I. The Swamp Thing and his Swamp Cat.

just go ahead and tell me."

As I recalled, the deadline was after dinner. I didn't count on being elbow deep in dinner when she arrived. "I'm almost done here. I just need to get this stuff off my hands and get the bird in the oven."

"Why won't you do it?"

"Can this wait five minutes?"

"I suppose so. I've waited five years. We all have. I just can't believe you won't …"

I body slammed the chicken on the counter and splattered oil and tarragon everywhere. "Believe it! No! The answer is no! I don't even know I can do anything!"

"You've never even tried!" She touched my oily hands.

It was an eerie moment, her ivory hand laid upon mine as if it weren't smeared with goop, oblivious to the globs clinging to her beige silk blouse. I felt like the Swamp Thing. Somebody loved him too, as I recall. I looked into Shannon's eyes, and there it was again. The light. She wanted me to try out my powers more than she wanted to save her brother. Let's face it. Some brothers aren't missed. But people wait their whole lives to witness a miracle. "Is that what this is all about?You just want to see me do it?"

"Certainly not."She almost persuaded herself. She didn't even come close to persuading me. Quite the contrary. It was too much. Years of guilt and mystery and feeling like a freak, and now the love of my life wants me to perform like a dolphin jumping through a hoop—while the saved, the eye of the storm, the miracle kitty, isn't even watching, waiting only to eat some dead bird's heart, cooked the way he likes.

"It is, isn't it? It's driving you crazy. A gen-u-ine miracle Your boyfriend—with messianic gifts. How cool is that? Here. You want to see?" I scooped up Ben's innards waiting to be sautéed and shoved them deep inside the bird, grasped its oily breasts in both hands and waggled it in her face, then held it aloft, clamping my eyes shut, filling my mind with visions of a perfect chicken pecking celestial corn, or whatever it is they peck, cackling its head off, or maybe that was me. Shannon backed away in terror, knocking over her stool. I squeezed harder, imagined more vividly, willed more forcefully. "Come on you little fucker, live! Live! Live!"

And then I felt it, a squirming, writhing wriggling in my hands, and the bird broke loose, erupted from my grasp and hit the countertop, skittering wildly, huge drumsticks pumping footless oiled extremities across Formica. It was amazing how fast the fucking thing could go under the circumstances. Headless, it darted back and forth unpredictably, careening from coffee pot to toaster oven to food processor to bread machine, ricocheting off each white surface with a slimy green stripe. I lunged for it, caught a drumstick, but I couldn't hold on. It hit the floor with a sickening smack and kept running. Then out of nowhere, an airborne Ben landed on its back, digging his claws in deep. Nothing could slip from his grasp. He opened his jaws wide and sank his fangs repeatedly into the bird's thighs and chest, tearing away huge hunks of flesh and swallowing them whole, but still the bird struggled. The battle raged on, with the thing writhing to get free until Ben had consumed all but the bones. He stuck his head deep into the chest cavity, pulled out the still-beating heart, and devoured it in one bite.

There was a huge clatter behind me, and Shannon screamed again. She'd already screamed several times, as I recall. It was the stockpot lid hitting the floor. The goddamn neck was trying to leap out of the stockpot like a fish. I grabbed a long fork and harpooned it, tossing it to Ben on the floor, who polished it off in no time. No problem. I had plenty of stock in the freezer.

Ben was covered in green goop, as was I. The Swamp Thing and his Swamp Cat. The floor was a slimy, glistening extra virgin olive oil lagoon. Dear Rachael Ray, I tried your chicken recipe and wasn't entirely pleased with the results …

I knelt down and started washing off Ben with a wet towel. He was jazzed, purring like an outboard motor, a prizefighter who'd miraculously gone the distance and defeated the champ against all the odds. Usually he preferred to clean himself, but the prize was worth any indignity It wasn't every day he scored an entire six-pound bird for his personal consumption. Shannon and I would have to go out for dinner, I was thinking, or there was always takeout. I was in a tiny bit of denial.

I'd been avoiding looking at her, though that must be her I heard whimpering. Finally, I looked up from my sopping, wild-eyed cat, still hyper-ventilating, his stuffed gut swelled out like he was pregnant. She was standing in the corner by the kitchen door, backed into the coat rack, still holding an umbrella cocked like a baseball bat. She'd picked it up when the reanimated chicken was headed right for her, before Ben leapt to the rescue. "Still want me to heal your brother?" I asked. In retrospect, not the best thing to say.

She looked at the umbrella as if she had no memory of how she came to be holding it. Judging from the look of terror on her face, she remembered, perhaps too vividly, what had just happened—the bizarre battle that had raged at her feet—two immortals in a battle to the death.

Ben took a step toward her. "It's okay, Shannon," he said. "It's dead now."

She threw down the umbrella and dashed out of the house. Her car started seconds later and roared off, tires squealing. I'd never known Shannon to drive like that.

"Don't worry," Ben said. "She'll be back."

"Yeah. What woman can resist us?"

The aroma of tarragon and garlic and death hung heavy in the air. I should mop it up, I thought, but I couldn't face the prospect of reliving the moment just yet. The one for me, the love of my life, was gone. Ben had wandered off and was licking the floor. Maybe he can make himself sick licking up the residue of this disaster, I thought. But that's right. He never gets sick. Remember-r-r-r? "I'm going out," I announced.

Ben knew not to say a word.

I walked over to the barbecue place and had chicken that tasted like vinegar and smoke, fire and brimstone. I drank cheap beer and listened to a steady stream of country and western whine, guy after guy

pleading for their lovers to forgive them their sins, hanging on to enough hope to manage three chords and a catchy plea built around some outrageous conceit, but none of their desperate hope was contagious, and I remained hopeless. These guys strayed, lied, drank, whatever—typical fucked-up guy stuff. None of them had ever resurrected a six-pound roaster as a clearly hostile act in the midst of a rational discussion. No. At some point, the weirdness has to set off deeply rooted survival alarm bells to head for the hills and not look back. I didn't know how anyone could just work around something like the ride Shannon had been on ever since she was just trying to help and made Ben an appointment at the vet.

Somehow I knew this time, maybe for the only time, I was right and Ben was wrong. Shannon wasn't coming back. I started crying, and the manager came over to tell me I had to leave. I couldn't believe it. I ate his bad food, listened to his sad songs—whose composers would be out of work if they couldn't rhyme die, lie, and goodbye with cry, cry, cry—and now he wanted me to leave because of a few tears? I could've done a whole lot worse than tears. I had a good mind to find his walk-in and resurrect his entire inventory, set it loose in the dining room to run amok in his crappy sauce, but of course, I didn't. Wouldn't. Ever again.

Benjamin and a chicken—that's it. My healing career was over.

All attempts to locate Shannon failed. She left town that night apparently, and nobody ever heard from her. Nobody who would tell me, anyway.

A few years later, Dad died, and Mom died the year after that. I held out some hope that Shannon might show up at their funerals, but of course she didn't. Aubrey died, unplugged by his parents apparently. I read the notice in the paper. I lurked nearby in the cemetery, but only the parents and the preacher were there.

When I came home after, even Ben finally admitted we were never seeing Shannon again. "I'm sorry," he said. "I should never have surrendered to my predatory instincts."

"It's not your fault. You're a predator, for christ's sake. It was my fault. I had no business bringing that chicken back to life."

He nodded in somber agreement. "True. True."

We missed her terribly, but we rarely spoke of her. It was too painful for us both.

My parents had left me a modest inheritance, which I invested in the stock market. After weeks fine-tuning voice recognition software so Ben could use the computer, I turned the portfolio over to him, and in no time he'd made us wealthy enough to retire and travel. We went everywhere. If Ben had read about it, he wanted to go there, and if he wanted to go, we usually went, and if we went, I never regretted it. We went to incredible places. We went to ordinary places made incredible by the wonders Ben knew we'd find there.

I soon discovered that if you have enough money, you can take your cat anywhere, especially when you get older. People put up with things from old people, probably figuring they haven't got too long. An old man denied his desires by some heartless gatekeeper may have missed his last chance. What sort of old age might such a heartless individual expect when it comes his time to travel about pathetically with some old cat in a carrier, when the sign clearly says NO ANIMALS ALLOWED? What? An empty building? Do you think homo sapiens aren't animals? What then are they, I'd like to know! Oh yes, by the time I'm 84, I can take my cat anywhere.

Trouble is I'm too sick to go anymore.

We've come to rest in Catemaco, a lovely town on a beautiful lake in Mexico, that teems with cats and brujas—witches—and is a favorite town of ours. We've rented a place with a balcony overlooking the lake. The fishermen still fish with hand-tossed nets from small one-man boats. I like to watch them at dusk, casting their nets into water and sky the color of burnished copper. The fish are delicious, embedded with cloves of garlic and fried whole.

They're only a memory to me now. I can't keep anything down. Everything tastes like ashes anyway. The doctor has come and gone. He's said there's nothing to be done to save me. He could admit me to the hospital, so that I might be more comfortable, but when I said I would be more comfortable here watching the fishermen with my cat, he bowed, in deference to my age I suppose, and said he understood.

Benjamin, who's befriended both cats and witches here, has returned with a woman named Hermalinda who brews teas for us both. He has broken his long silence with her, and she has agreed to come see to our needs. "Will it cure me?" I ask Ben of the tea she's brewing. I'm surprised I can smell it. I haven't smelled anything in a long while. I've had to give up cooking.

"Of old age," Ben replies, but I've forgotten what I just asked him.

"I'm afraid," I confess to my old friend.

"I know," he says. "Everything will be all right. I'll be joining you. Walk like an Egyptian." He laughs at his cat humor, very sly, but I don't get it. I wonder what Hermalinda is brewing for him. Probably nip. It's always the nip with him.

Hermalinda props me up in bed so that I might look out the balcony at the copper waters, the fishermen's nets like women's fans opening and closing, leaving behind a glistening spray of memories. She holds the cup to my lips. It tastes of cloves and juniper. She patiently gives me the whole cup, sip by sip. The last sip is sweet, like honey, like roses.

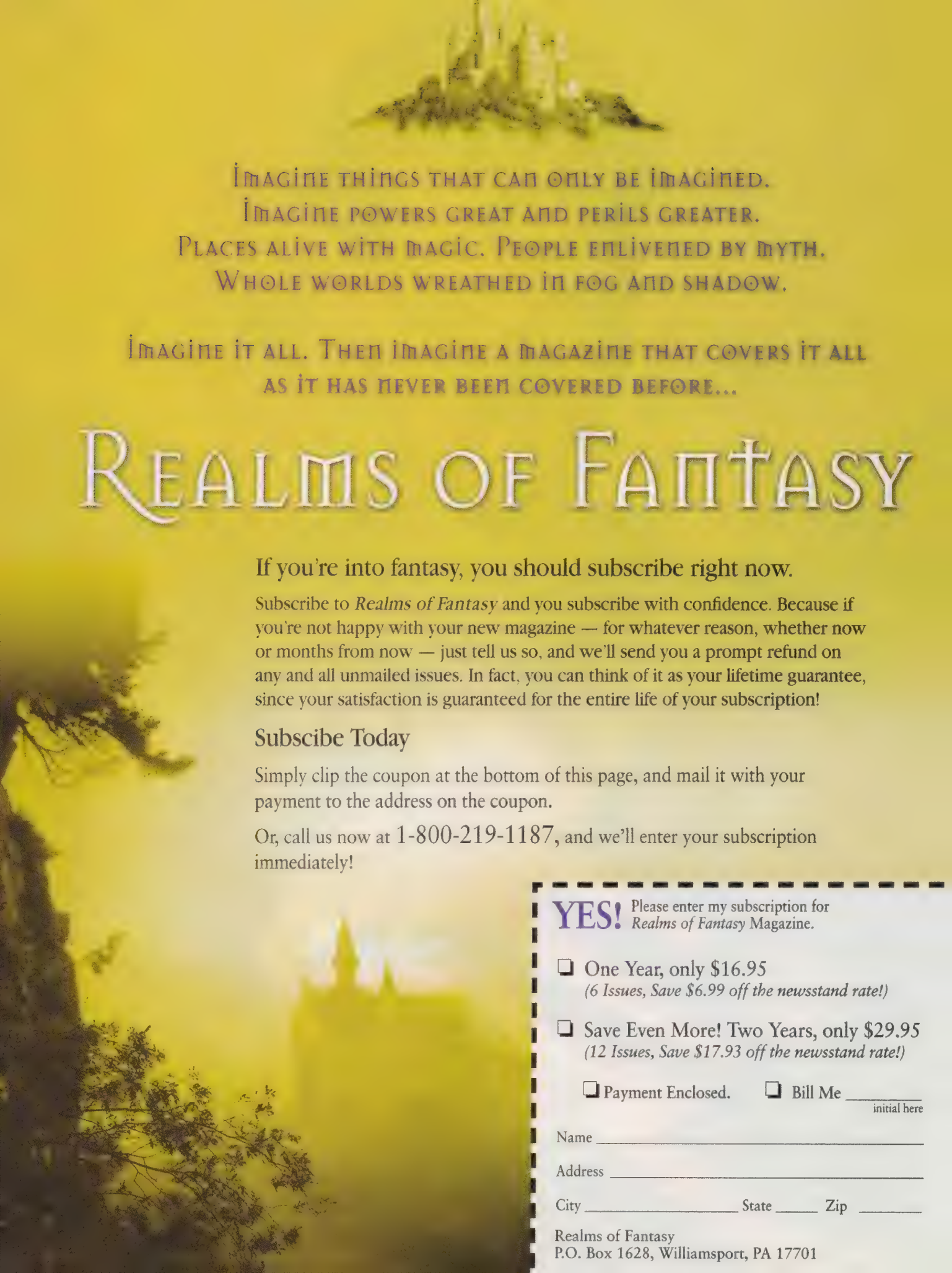
She sets a saucer on the floor for Ben and quietly slips out the door. Ben quickly laps up his tea and jumps onto the bed, spry as ever, pushing my frail hands apart and inserting himself once more in my grasp. I can feel him through my skin, thin as paper, his heart beating, hard and steady, through my fingertips. "Good night, Jeffrey." He purrs softly, and my hands tingle. I remember the tune from so long ago, centuries in cat years:

> … Old Blue died and he died so hard
> Shook the ground in my backyard
> Dug his grave with a silver spade
> Lowered him down with links of chain
> Every link I did call his name
> Here Blue, you good dog you
> Here Blue, I'm a-coming there too!

Ben stops purring, and a moment later, his heart stops, and he's gone just like that. He's tricked me—knowing where he leads, I'll follow—fleeing the unbearable emptiness of this world without him—he's shown me the way. Some Day has finally come.

Everyone dies. Even Ben.

For me.



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Does the end of time mean the end of hope? Or is it only the beginning?

Digging for Paradise

By Ian Creasey

Illustration by Rob Johnson

Before I opened my eyes, I knew we'd arrived. I felt no sway, no stomach-turning pitch or lurch as the waves tried to coax another tribute of vomit from my empty gizzard. "Was it a long voyage?" I asked. The longer it had taken, the longer my wife had suffered in the cages of correction.

"Very long," said Ren Gessel's deep voice. "How do you feel, Hadro? I can give you a restorative, but only if you need it. I must conserve my power."

Wiping accumulated dust from my eyelids, I sat up and saw a large room full of supplies and weapons and crates of equipment. It wasn't the cabin where I'd spent nerve-jangling hours fearing that the spikemen would catch up with me before we could sail. "You carried me off the ship?"

"Yes, and further than that," said Ren Gessel. My employer looked tired and haggard, his hair whiter than I remembered. Maybe there'd been storms. I was glad I'd let him spell me into stasis for the journey.

"There was no sense in reviving you until we needed you," said Lavane. I smiled at the presumptuous 'we': it was Ren Gessel who needed me, not his bodyguard. She eyed me sidelong, her gaze constantly shifting in search of danger.

I stretched kinks from my muscles. "Let's get to work." The sooner we started, the sooner we would find whatever Ren Gessel sought, and the sooner his reward would let me return home with enough money to bribe the spikemen—who were as corrupt as they were cruel—for my wife's freedom. I picked up one of the crates and carried it outside.

A cool, steady breeze ruffled lush grass and a few small purple flowers. The sun shone from a cloudless sky. I judged the time to be late afternoon, though the sunlight was oddly red. Perhaps a haze tinged the air, from some nearby quarry or distant volcano.

I stood on a hill's lower slope. In one direction, the hills grew taller, toward distant mountains. In another, trees thickened into a forest. Their leaves looked dark, almost black. Downhill I heard running water. The empty countryside marked a change from the old temples and ruins where I normally worked: places already well picked over by others before me. This site appeared untouched.

The grass sparkled with a faint iridescence. I bent down to pluck a tuft, and winced as it stung my fingers. The blades of grass had a keen edge, as if they'd found a way to fight back against grazing herds. What land was this? I shook my head. It didn't matter —nothing mattered except rescuing Arione.

Ren Gessel strode out to join me. From the outside I recognized his portable house, a two-dimensional façade like stage scenery. I'd never seen the magically elongated interior before; the only previous time I worked for him, I'd used my own tent.

"Where are we digging?" I asked.

He gestured to a walking-cane stuck upright in the earth. "There. Nine hundred and fifty feet down."

I gaped like a fish. "Nine hundred and fifty feet?"

Lavane said, "Surely that won't be a problem for Hadro, the man who boasted of a thousand-foot dig in Rostal."

"Those were Rostallan feet," I said. "They're a delicate, small-boned race."

It's true I sometimes exaggerate, but modern kit will dig as far as your patience and magic will stretch. The depth mainly concerned me

because a long dig would delay my return for Arione. I hurriedly opened crates, spilling equipment onto the grass. Sharp steel glinted in the sunlight.

When I'd finished assembling the cutter, Ren Gessel gave me a small power-stone from his pouch. With it, I activated the drill. The blades whirled, churning up grass and purple flowers. The cutter's noise made me realize how quiet the site had been beforehand. As the steel sank into the soil, the note deepened into a throb. I checked the supports, but they felt secure. I watched the hopper fill with soil, stones and severed earthworms.

The sorcerer smiled. "A good start," he said. "Keep an eye on it, and we'll bring you something to eat."

"A chair would be nice," I called after him.

I glanced up at the sun, which had hardly lowered at all. Had I really set everything up that quickly? I must have done. I grinned— I was good at this. No wonder Ren Gessel had hired me again.

More people came out of the house. From her stiff black bonnet I recognized Frelenger, the cook. And was that Maffle carrying chairs? I was surprised to see Ren Gessel's factotum here, though glad of the extra company. This looked to be an isolated spot: I hadn't seen or heard any sign of habitation, not even the bleating of a distant sheep.

I didn't bother asking Ren Gessel where we were. Like many relic-hunters, he travelled with his hirelings in stasis to prevent them learning the site's location. I didn't mind; it saved me from being seasick.

"Are there any locals to worry about?" I asked, when we had all settled down to eat.

"We haven't seen any people, but there are plenty of other possible threats," said Lavane. "I've already swept the area and killed everything I could find. Anything here might be a trap."

I frowned. "Does that mean we need to post a watch tonight?" Although Ren Gessel could set wards, he wouldn't squander his power on any task that people could perform.

"Later, but not tonight." She emphasized the last word, then pointed at the sun, which still cast late-afternoon shadows onto the grass.

Still? The sun was no lower than it had been when I woke.

Ren Gessel coughed, then said, "When you agreed to do another dig for me, you said you'd go anywhere as long as the reward justified it."

"I remember," I said. Because Arione had been imprisoned for offenses against the Paragon's dignity, releasing her would require mountainous bribes. Ren Gessel's offer had looked like my only chance of raising such a sum, while also escaping the spikemen who sought to associate me with my wife's sedition.

"And so I put you in stasis." The sorcerer paused. "You've been in stasis for a long time, as indeed have we all. You were just the first to go under, and the last to come out."

"How long?" I demanded.

He shook his head. "I can't give a figure in years—I don't know how long the year is now. Certainly it no longer has three hundred and sixty-five days. After all, there are no days."

"No days?" I looked at the red sun again.

"The sun hasn't moved since I came out of stasis. I have slept a dozen times since then."

I tried to take this in. "What about my friends, my family? What about Arione?"

"They are long dead," said the sorcerer.

Full of rage, I sprang from my chair toward Ren Gessel. Lavane rushed to shield him, clutching my outstretched arm and wrestling me to the ground.

"You leprous lizard!" I said to Ren Gessel, ignoring the knife that Lavane held at my throat. "What gave you the right to put me under for so long? Now I'll never see my wife again."

"But you will," he said, "if you wish it."

He spoke with such confidence, such sorcerer's arrogance, that my muscles untensed and my anger receded a little. Lavane allowed me to roll aside and—at a safe distance from her master—pick myself up and brush purple petals from my leather tunic.

Ren Gessel said, "Do you think I would come so far if the prize were not worthwhile? I promised you sufficient reward, and you shall have it. Whatever your heart desires, you shall have."

I'd heard such offers before. Hedge-wizards often made extravagant claims, contingent upon receiving enough funds to procure recondite necessities. But Ren Gessel was a true sorcerer, not a charlatan.

"I can desire many things," I said. "Can you fulfil such an inviting promise?" I glanced at the others' expressions, from Frelenger's guarded anticipation to Maffle's open yearning, and realized that they already believed.

Ren Gessel nibbled a slice of cinnamon loaf. "I'm sure you've heard the expression, 'there's no such thing as a free spell.' All magic requires energy: for instance, my power-stones fuel the cutter. The difficulty of magic is not spells, but finding power to drive them.

"The earth emits energy, but only very slowly. That's why the best sorcerer is an old sorcerer: it takes all his life to acquire enough power to achieve anything. Hence our desire for short-cuts—we steal power from each other, or from the past. You've helped me dig in ancient cities, looking for relics of long-dead sorcerers and civilizations."

Now Ren Gessel looked smug. "Many sorcerers place stones in the earth to absorb its power, then collect them years later. The longer a stone is left, the more power it absorbs. I realized that I could improve the harvest by putting myself in stasis. And if I were to abandon my own time, my own friends and rivals, why sleep for a mere century or millennium? Why not wait until the End of Days? By then the slow drip of energy would have accumulated to almost infinite power."

"And that's down there, is it?"

Ren Gessel smiled, like a dog digging for the world's biggest bone.

"Lucky for you it didn't get lost," I said.

"Naturally I took precautions. I sowed over a thousand stones, sealed to my own aura. Many disappeared. The others all moved during the aeons: some are under the sea, or on the night side. This one is the most accessible."

"But what do you plan to do with so much power?" Like many of my countrymen enduring the Paragon's rule, I had an instinctive suspicion of despots, spikemen and tax assessors.

"I want to recapture the Golden Age," Ren Gessel said, his eyes distant with longing. "I was born—we all were—in degenerate times, far decayed from the marvels of the past. That's why I didn't mind putting myself into stasis: I wasn't leaving anything significant. The first sorcerers were more fortunate—born into a world full of energy, they had only to touch the soil to tap its power. What wonders they achieved! In time they squeezed the earth dry, and subsequent sorcerers were reduced to digging for their scraps ... until now.

"We will make a new Age of Wonders. And I'll reward you well, all of you." The sorcerer looked at everyone in turn, then addressed me. "Hadro, I know you feel upset and deceived. I would have asked your agreement, but I couldn't explain my plan and risk your refusal. After I

put myself in stasis, you could have searched out my power-stones, or mentioned them to one of my rivals. I couldn't risk our destination being known to anyone not coming with us. Otherwise, we might have arrived at the End of Days to find no power-stones, no reward, only cold eternal night."

"But surely that means you can't send us back to our own time, for fear of the same risk." My shoulders tensed with frustration as I tried to unravel his explanation. "You said I could see Arione again —how can that happen?"

Ren Gessel smiled once more, the smile of a man with answers to all questions. "You can raise her from the dead. Anyone you wish to see—your friends, your family, your gambling partners—you can resurrect at your bidding."

"That's impossible," I said, reflexively dismissing charlatanism. Then I remembered the phrase Ren Gessel had used: infinite power.

"Magic can do anything," he said. "That's why it's called magic."

At Ren Gessel's insistence, I taught everyone the basics of operating the cutter. This enabled us to work continuously in shifts. Since the sun never set, there was no reason to stop digging.

When my turn came to rest, I found sleep elusive in the eternal red daylight, with the drill a gnawing roar outside. I kept thinking of Arione, my lost love.

She was a singer with a wide repertoire, from fresh satires to bawdy old favorites. Performing at a tavern late one night, with the doors barred and the last few patrons demanding encores, she sang a few verses about Paragon Joronfil's alleged habit of sleeping with his valet, his prize pigs, his dead grandmother, a tree with a hole in its trunk ... but not the poor neglected wives who would never spawn an Epigon.

I was laughing and drinking along with everyone else, when black-uniformed spikemen burst in and seized Arione. Defiantly, she sang louder as they dragged her to the door. I rushed across, trying to intervene, and fell as two spike-shafts clubbed my head. By the time I picked myself up, Arione had gone.

We'd been married for three years. I never saw her again.

"But surely that means you can't send us back to our own time"

Now she was long dead, along with Paragon Joronfil and all his paramours.

Could I really raise my wife from the grave? Should I? What if she were in some serene paradise, and resented being brought back? Or what if she'd been released from the cages of correction, found that I'd disappeared, and spent the rest of her life happily with another man?

No doubt if I fetched her from the shades, I could return her if she objected. I could instead take my pick from all the pretty women who had ever lived....

The thought of so much power both allured and repelled me. Still, I only had Ren Gessel's promise that he would fulfil our wishes. Perhaps when we reached his stone, he would find it more convenient to retain power himself.

With these dark thoughts I at last slept, dreaming of an army of spikemen who dug deep into the earth with their bloodstained blades, only to find at the bottom not a power-stone but Arione's long-dead corpse....

And so the days went. Every time I woke up, I called it a new day, though the sun stayed obstinately stuck in the sky. Indeed, only the drill's progress hinted that time passed. The soil had grown deep over the aeons. When the drill finally hit bedrock, its note changed to a grinding roar.

As Frelenger peeled potatoes for our next meal—my breakfast, her lunch and Maffle's dinner—I offered to help with the carrots. Then I asked her how long she'd known Ren Gessel.

"All my life," she said. "My father was his bookkeeper. When I grew old enough, I started as a kitchen skivvy."

"Were you never tempted to find something better elsewhere?"

"I didn't want to leave my family. Then after my father died, I had a good position and I'd settled down. We're not all gallivanting adventurers, you know." She eyed my clumsy carrot-chopping with disdain.

"You were happy to work for Ren Gessel? What's he like at home?" I felt that if anyone knew his character, it would be a servant who'd lived all her life in his household.

"He's not the type to force himself on kitchen maids," said Frelenger, sweeping peeled vegetables into the pot. "And he always promised that if I stuck with him, he'd see me right."

"You've stuck with him across uncounted years, and you're still waiting." I hefted the pot onto the fire. "How did you feel about being dragged to the End of Days?"

She shrugged. "Potatoes need peeling here just like anywhere else."

"Maybe they won't!" I said, exasperated. "Maybe when Ren Gessel gets his infinite power, the potatoes will magically peel themselves, cook themselves and dip themselves in the salt-cellar."

Something flickered in Frelenger's grey eyes. "Then I shall be glad of the rest."

"Is that all you're looking forward to? Did you have to abandon everyone and everything you knew, just for that?" I clenched my jaw shut, suddenly aware that I'd been projecting too much of my own resentment.

"It's not your business what I'm looking forward to," said Frelenger, stirring the pot with tense jerks of her spoon. "Who are you to pry into our lives? Who are you to ask my heart's desire? Whatever it is, it isn't you!"

"I'm sorry." I held up my hands, realizing what she thought I wanted. She couldn't know I loved Arione far too much to chase other women. "I just want to know what you think of Ren Gessel, because I'm trying to see if we can trust him."

Frelenger gave me a long quizzical look. "And if we can't?"

That was the question. What if we couldn't trust Ren Gessel with infinite power? Then, surely, I should prevent him from getting it. Maybe I could sabotage the cutter, though the damage would have to be too drastic for him to repair.

Yet the decision wasn't mine alone. I resented the way Ren Gessel had hauled me here without consent; but if I took it on myself to commit sabotage, I would be guilty of similarly disregarding my fellows. Before I acted, I had to discover what everyone thought.

Maffle would be next. I didn't know him very well. He looked a few years older than me—probably the far side of forty, though unlike me he still had most of his hair. As Ren Gessel's factotum, who ran the estate in his master's absence, he didn't normally come on digs. But since we couldn't go back, this perpetual afternoon was everyone's new estate.

I found Maffle at prayer. I waited for him to finish, then enquired which deity he acknowledged. "Does your god still exist at the End of

Days, after so long without worshippers?"

"If not, we will remake him," Maffle said. "After all, since Vastnar created men at the beginning of time, it's only fair that we should return the favor at the end." He made a reverential gesture to his testicles—the Vastnaric fount of holiness, being the mortal representation of the divine creation of life.

"You think Ren Gessel will have enough power to create gods?" I asked, instinctively appalled.

"Oh yes." Maffle pointed to the cutter. "We're digging for only the first power-stone, the one within easiest reach. When he has that, he'll be able to recover the others from under mountains and seas. All of them will have accumulated boundless earth-energy over the aeons. That's how he can afford to give us our share."

"And you're confident we'll get that share? You think he'll keep his word?"

"Why wouldn't he?" said Maffle. "If he didn't want to share, he didn't have to bring us along. Sure, we do the digging and the cooking and whatnot—but he could manage on his own if he wanted to."

This argument failed to convince me. Ren Gessel couldn't have known what he would find at the End of Days, and surely he'd brought servants in case conditions had turned out much harsher.

More importantly, it seemed that neither Frelenger nor Maffle doubted Ren Gessel's good nature. Perhaps he'd ensorcelled them, instilling loyalty ... though if he would stoop to that, then I wouldn't be doubting him.

No, the favorable opinions surely arose from Ren Gessel's past character. Yet by all accounts Paragon Joronfil had been a polite and pleasant young man, before attaining the throne and turning into a ravening despot. When he possessed the power-stone, Ren Gessel's fine intentions could slide into darker temptations.... And the greater the power, the worse the tyranny.

I clutched my talisman: a shiny black crow carved from jet, which I'd found on my first ever dig. It had brought luck to many later digs, but did I want this last one to succeed?

Volunteering to fetch firewood gave me time to ponder how to be sure of the sorcerer's trustworthiness ... and not only his. If he gave boundless power to the others—enough that Maffle could think of creating gods—then I would need to worry about them, too. And they would worry about me. We were like a band of pirates following a treasure map and digging for a chest of gold. I remembered Arione's ballads, full of blood and betrayal.

I skirted the hills until I reached the forest, where I found trees taller than I'd ever seen. The pines strained up toward the sun, not wasting needles on lower branches, but bristling at the top like spiky parasols. In the gloom of the forest floor there grew no brambles or moss. Because the sun never moved, the canopy had grown into a shape that monopolized its light, leaving little to nourish green plants lower down. Instead, toadstools and puffballs sprouted from the ground in orange and red and brown and deathly white.

Mellifluous birdsong echoed above me. I craned my neck, and saw a bird with grey and blue plumage, looking like a cross between a jay and a wood-pigeon. With a jolt of surprise I realized that its call was no ordinary chirping: the tune used the same scale of notes as any human singer. Other refrains drifted between the trees. Occasionally two birds—perhaps a breeding pair—harmonized on the same theme. The music reminded me painfully of Arione, who used to improvise wordless melodies by the fireside while I sat polishing long-buried coins.

The songbirds showed no interest in me, even when I tried to whistle back one of their tunes. Were they trained pets, whose masters preferred to stay hidden? Or had they become musical in a distant aeon, and retained the talent long after their audience departed?

My stomach growled like the cutter, telling me to start heading back. I stuffed some fungi into my pocket, hoping Frelenger might pass them as edible. At least they'd be a change from our regular menu of fish from the river, augmented by the sacks of rice and potatoes we'd brought through stasis.

Ren Gessel promised that once we reached his power-stone, we'd be able to conjure up any meal we liked. Whalemeat, peaches, almonds, blackberry jam: the more he described the banquets ahead, the more tasteless our brown rice became.

At the edge of the forest I loaded my sack with as much dry timber as I could carry, then set off back to camp, guided by the roar of the drill and the huge heap of spoil that scarred the hillside. The cutter pulverized the rock into gravel and grey powder, which the wind then whipped up into plumes of dust that made you cough if you strayed downwind. The wind only ever blew in one direction: sunward.

As I climbed the hill, I noticed more of the purple flowers. The blooms were taller now. Did this world have seasons, or had those vanished with the days? I picked a flower and sniffed. Its faint musty fragrance reminded me of old books, like the tattered songsheets I'd given to Arione after excavating them in the Red Desert. I'd spent most of my life salvaging treasure and trash; I wondered just how many relics of ancient eras lay in the strata beneath the End of Days. In other circumstances I might have relished the thought of so much antiquity to plunder.

Lavane was busy cutting down the purple blooms. Maybe she feared some unlikely danger from them, or maybe she was just bored. Because she had to stick close to Ren Gessel, she couldn't wander off as I'd done.

"Any sign of people?" she asked, alert to all threats.

"Not unless you count surprisingly musical birds." I described what I'd heard.

She frowned. "Those songs could be thoughts and memories in a vast avian brain. Imagine a flock of birds—what better home for an immortal mind? Individual birds may die, but the flock survives. It reeks of Jallim, or one of Ren Forlia's schemes."

"You worry too much," I said. "Do you really think that one of Ren Gessel's rivals has chased him all the way to the end of time?"

"I'd be glad if it were only one," said Lavane. "With all that power soon to be harvested, surely there must be predators lurking. We arrived the easy way, through stasis. If our enemies have waited through the aeons, they've had plenty of time to construct the perfect trap...."

"Ah, nobody's home," I said. "There's so much deadwood in the forest, it's obvious no-one's carrying it away. It feels like we're the only people alive."

"Nonsense," said Ren Gessel. "You've walked a few miles, not explored the whole world. There are probably people somewhere, whether lying in wait over the hill, or beyond those mountains. When I get the power, I'll be able to scan every acre of the land."

Nowadays, all blessings were imminent. It was like living with a sect leader who kept promising heaven. And heaven lay only six hundred feet away. Though since we were striking downward, heaven didn't seem the right word....

"I don't understand why we're digging at all," I said. "If you spelled us here, why couldn't you spell the power-stones to the same place? Or at least keep them on the surface?"

"We were in stasis, untouched by time," said Ren Gessel. "But the power-stones had to abide through millennia, absorbing energy all the while. That's why the shifting earth has buried them."

Lavane said, "Will you have enough power to start the days again? I want to see the dawn, to salute the rising sun with my blade."

"I expect so. It only takes finite energy to turn the world." He looked up at the unchanging sky. "When we find night again, will we find the moon? And do the stars still shine?"

Frelenger returned from the river, carrying our next meal. My heart sank—fish again. And no-one else would drop in for dinner, or try to rob us in the night. There was no night, and no-one else.

Maffle strolled out of the house, yawning and scratching, no doubt propelled by an instinct for what his rota called breakfast. He began helping Frelenger gut and fry the fish. As another hopper-load of spoil rose to the surface, I automatically picked up a shovel.

"Leave it," said Ren Gessel. "Since we are all here and awake, I feel that now is the time to address certain, um, discontents that have made themselves known." He refrained from looking at anyone in particular, but I guessed that either Frelenger or Maffle had told him of my questioning.

The rare silence of the cutter's halt gave weight to Ren Gessel's words, as if the empty world waited for him to give voice to its destiny.

"I've said only a little about what I plan to do—and learn—with the power I gain. We haven't yet reached the stone, after all. But I want to assure you"—he paused and gestured to each of us in turn—"that you won't have to live in my realm if you prefer not to. I've promised you all a share of power, and I stand by that. You can create your own realms—everyone has their personal vision of paradise. Why would you want to live in mine when you can fashion your own?"

"But how will we do that?" said Frelenger, surprising me with her willingness to speak up. "You're the sorcerer. You know how to use magic, and we don't."

"I'll provide a way to use magic by simple commands," said Ren Gessel. "I'm sure you've heard old tales of magic lamps with genies who grant three wishes. You may think of these buried power-stones"—he pointed to the ground—"as magic lamps that have been harvesting wishes for uncounted aeons. I'll give each of you a genie who'll fulfil any desire you express. That's straightforward. The hard part of making a magic lamp is not summoning a genie, it's putting the wishes inside. Those are what we journeyed to the End of Days to find. You just need to decide what yours will be."

"You make it sound so perfect," I said. "How do we know it'll really be like that?"

"I ask you to take it on trust," said Ren Gessel. "I realize that may be hard. But in the end, no-one can live a life entirely without trust. Otherwise how could you eat the fish that Frelenger cooks, not trusting that she won't poison you? How could you sleep, not trusting that someone won't stab you before you wake? The world is built on trust. A husband has to trust his wife; a businessman trusts his colleague; a priest must trust his god. Without trust, we can achieve nothing."

His casual mention of the word 'wife' pierced my heart. Ren Gessel had deceived me into losing Arione—and so I could never trust him.

"I can't rely on trust alone," I said, striving to sound calmer than I felt. "I want a binding agreement."

"Like a contract?" he said, looking displeased by my doubt.

"An irrevocable contract, signed before you get the power-stone. A magical oath that you can't break—that none of us can break."

Ren Gessel grimaced. Before he could speak I added, "It must be possible. You said that magic can do anything."

"You're right," he admitted. "It's called a geas. I'm disappointed that you feel it necessary, and it does have drawbacks, but I can understand why you suggest it."

"What are the drawbacks?" asked Maffle.

"Mainly that you have to be very careful exactly what you agree to. After all, the whole point is that it's unbreakable. If circumstances change, or if you change your mind—tough. And since I assume we all plan to live forever, that's all the more reason to be cautious."

"But you'd be willing?" I asked. I wanted him to commit to it, or be exposed as unwilling to bind himself to what he'd promised.

Ren Gessel nodded. "In principle, yes. Not in haste—as I said, it's important to be careful with the wording. But we have time to agree on that, while we dig."

"Then it's settled," I said. I held out my hand toward the group, and one by one everyone proffered their own hand to the communal pledge.

We shoveled out the hopper's spoil, then sent the cutter back down to delve closer to the power.

I retired to my room. Outside, the cutter's grinding rumble no longer sounded quite so ominous. Assuming we could agree an acceptable formula for creating our sovereign realms—and mutual self-interest should smooth the process—my concerns would be alleviated. I no longer had to fear Ren Gessel grabbing everything for himself, reducing us to his slaves.

Guaranteed my own power, I only had to decide how to use it. I wanted Arione back, of course, but there'd be no point revivifying her if she didn't like what she found.

In the hinterland between wakefulness and sleep, I imagined calling forth my wife. In my vision she wore trinkets I'd given her: the bracelet and brooch salvaged on relic-hunting expeditions, the necklace and earrings set with ancient gems. I loved to restore the occasional treasures I dug up, and she loved to wear them and show them off.

"Hello darling," I said. "I'm sorry it took me so long to rescue you. I got kidnapped to the End of Days."

"I always trusted that you'd come for me when you could," she said. "I never lost hope. But where are we now? What's it like out there?"

"It can be whatever we want. I've been given a share of powerful magic."

She nodded with dreamlike acceptance. "I understand. So you can summon me, and you can summon anyone else you want. And you can dismiss us if you tire of us."

"I wouldn't do that," I protested.

"I know you wouldn't, dear," she said. "But what of the others— the sorcerer and his servants? Could they summon me? Do they also have power over everyone who ever lived?"

I frowned. "I guess so. But if I raise you first—and it'll be the very first thing I do—you would be in my realm, under my protection. Who else do we want with us? Name them, and they shall be safe."

She shook her head. "If you put it like that, it's not a matter of who I name, but who I don't. Who shan't be safe? Who do we abandon to the whims of absolute power?"

There was only one answer to that. "No-one," I said. I loved Arione because she always brought out the best in me. "We must find a safeguard for everyone."

Arione smiled, looking as beautiful as she had on our wedding day. I drifted into sleep, and dreamed of happier times.

Ren Gessel tweaked our shift rota to include periods when we were all awake and available for discussion. Like pirates dividing the treasure of a ship we had not yet boarded, we squabbled over the terms of our agreement.

"Surely it doesn't have to be complicated," said Maffle. "Ren Gessel agrees that he will give us power-stones and genies who'll perform our wishes. Then we all agree that we'll have our own independent realms, and won't use our power against each other. What else is required?"

"Plenty," I said. "It's not just ourselves who deserve protection from each other. It's everyone who we might resurrect or create."

"What do you mean, Hadro?" Maffle conveyed his disdain by speaking my name with the declension denoting an unbeliever.

"When you remake your god and populate your new realm, not everyone might be happy with their place." Knowing of Vastnar's strictures on the proper hierarchy of sexes and classes, I felt safe in saying this. "Will you punish them for that? Suppose someone —let's say — sings a satirical song about you, will you allow them the dignity of independent thought?"

"You sound like a political agitator," said Ren Gessel.

"Perhaps I do," I said. "I can understand your distaste. Sorcerers are well known for hoarding their powers, consorting with despots, and doing little to help the lot of the common man. But if infinite power is enough to share with the few of us, is it not enough to share with everyone, so the whole world can be free?"

"Not everyone deserves such power," said Maffle.

"Criminals, the feeble-minded," Lavane put in.

I changed tack. "Think of it not as sharing power, but sharing freedom. We have the chance to build a new world, one free from all the faults of the old. Don't people deserve protection from all the abuses that the strong inflict on the weak?"

These sentiments only led to more quibbles. Since Ren Gessel kept stressing the importance of not agreeing to anything that we couldn't live with forever, our discussions often degenerated into squabbles over petty matters of degree and definition. Indeed, I feared that we might spend years in such pettifogging, never reaching or using the power-stone because we couldn't agree on how to share it.

Yet even that would be better than untrammeled use. I felt encouraged that we all cared enough to argue over the process, that we had implicitly accepted the principle of setting limits to power. We were writing a constitution for a new world. Each time I retired for sleep, I called up my memories of Arione, asking myself what she would think. Her remembered smile gave me the strength to fight for our convictions, to prevent any future generations ever fearing the spikemen and the cages of correction. If Paragon Joronfil himself—or anyone like him—were resurrected, he would have no power to implement his cruel caprices.

Meanwhile, our pit descended further into the hillside. The drill's rumble turned into a whining screech. An ominous crack echoed up the shaft, and the camp fell silent. I recalled the cutter, to find that the main blade had broken. We had spares, of course. I stripped the assembly, cleaned and oiled the entire mechanism, and replaced the cutting edges. Then I kissed my crow talisman before restarting the drill.

But straight away, the new blade also broke.

Lavane peered into the shaft and wrinkled her nose. "There's a miasma of malice down there. It could be the psychic essence that Jallim has faded into, after devoting himself to thwarting our plans for eternity. Or it could be—"

"Never mind what it could be. Let's find out what it is," I said.

Everyone stared at me expectantly. The cutter was my speciality — the reason I'd been brought to the End of Days. If I couldn't fix the problem, our arguments would be useless, for we would have no power to argue over.

Standing in the empty hopper, I shivered as I sank into the earth. It wasn't from cold: the shaft sheltered me from the winds above, and the air grew hotter as I descended. It was from an irrational fear that the others would suddenly start shoveling rock back into the hole. I looked up, but saw only a pinprick of light above me, like a single star on a cloudy night.

I welcomed the darkness. I was tired of the sun, of the eternal afternoon. I wanted bright mornings and gloomy twilight. I wanted to sit round a campfire at midnight, swapping colorful anecdotes that sounded more plausible in the dark.

With a bump, the hopper landed at the bottom of the narrow shaft. I ignited my lightstick, then knelt and peered through the vents— I'd removed the drill for this investigation—to examine the substance that had broken our blades.

It glittered. My first thought was that we'd tried to drill into an enormous diamond. But all inspection around the rim of the hopper revealed the same white crystal shining back at me like ice. We had hit a whole layer, a stratum of something far harder than rock. Subtle variations in the crystal hinted at structure, though my vantage was too limited to guess its nature.

Had this been laid down deliberately to prevent us reaching the power-stone? I frowned, hoping it was mere chance, something that had accumulated naturally after our era. Using my toolkit, and with considerable effort, I managed to obtain a few small samples of the stratum.

On returning to the surface, I sent down a four-way explorer that would excavate horizontally at the bottom of the shaft. From this we'd learn how far the mysterious layer extended, and whether we could avoid it by diverting the angle of descent.

Then I devoted myself to testing the white material. I tried a range of acids and other concoctions, all of which failed to make any impact. I measured the substance's rigidity, and found that no standard blade could pierce it. I heated a sample, but it refused to melt. The stuff was utterly inert, yet stubbornly resistant. As the hours passed, I found it harder to restrain my temper every time Maffle or Lavane asked whether I'd found a solution.

At last I was too tired to continue, so I handed over to Ren Gessel to see if he could make any headway. Hating to admit defeat, I hoped that some inspiration would strike as I slept.

In my dreams, the white substance took odd shapes. I imagined bizarre dwellings, roads, whole cities built of the stuff—a world inhabited by crystalline creatures who were humanity's supplanters, perhaps even our exterminators. At last they themselves died out, and their entire civilization became compacted into an archaeological layer just above the dust of men.

And in nightmare, my drill reawakened these monsters, who had merely entered hibernation, and even now were crawling up the shaft to reconquer the world....

I woke sweating, and waited for my heart to slow back to normal. Then I visited Ren Gessel's suite, where I found him still poring over the samples I'd recovered. His workroom—far larger than the house that contained it—was full of clutter, with books and relics scattered everywhere. A jeweller's loupe lay discarded amid small probing tools coated with green powder.

"Any luck?" I asked.

"Not yet," he replied. "It's nothing I've encountered before. How much of it is there?"

"Let's find out." We walked to the worksite, where I discovered that —as I'd half-expected—the sideways drilling had been unable to find an end to the white stratum. "That's only a few hours, of course. We could try exploring further."

Ren Gessel descended to perform his own survey with sorcerous senses. "The layer extends far and wide," he said when he returned, "and is seven feet deep."

"Then we must go through it. 'Magic can do anything'," I quoted. "You'll have to enchant the blades so they can cut through this pesky barrier."

He shook his head, but he had no alternative to offer. In the end, and with rather bad grace, he ensorcelled the most suitable of our spare blades with the strength and sharpness parameters that I calculated.

The cutter had a new higher-pitched note as it slowly drilled through the strange material. When the first hopper-load arrived, I took my place with the shovel, eager to examine the spoil.

Under the red sun, the crystals glittered in myriad shades of pink and white. I wished that Arione were alive to wear them as jewels. My archaeological treasure-hunting instincts told me that the substance could once have told a story about those who'd created it, but too much time had passed—any information had been crushed by the pressure of aeons. The white shards were so rigidly unyielding that Lavane experimented with using them to sharpen and augment her weapons.

Progress was slow even with the ensorcelled cutter, and Ren Gessel became more irritable by the hour. His worry etched extra wrinkles onto his face—or so I thought, until I guessed what was really happening.

"Go into the house and fetch everything out," he said. "Hurry!"

We rushed inside and dragged out our own few possessions, then rescued Ren Gessel's library and stores from his impossibly large suite.

The house dissolved into dust, leaving only a greasy black residue on the ground.

"I could no longer spare the power to maintain it," said Ren Gessel. His voice sounded high and querulous, and liver-spots had colonized his skin. I realized that he was relaxing his sorcerous hold on an unnaturally prolonged life.

The others looked at me as if I were to blame for all this. "Hey, I didn't know the white layer would take so much power to cut through—or even that it was there." I turned to Ren Gessel. "Why didn't you scan in the first place?"

I loved the thought of what I might have to do. But wasn't the death of one man a small price for preventing an eternity of tyranny

"It would have taken far more energy to scan all the way down from the surface, and made no difference anyway. We still had to dig, regardless. I knew there would be unforeseen obstacles; I could only bring as much power as I possessed, and hope it sufficed."

The supplies included two tents. Ren Gessel and Lavane took one, while I joined Frelenger and Maffle in the other. Otherwise, time passed much as before, save with increased foreboding. What else might disappear like the house? In my nightmares, Ren Gessel's servants evaporated one by one, until I was next....

Some cheer arrived when the throb of the cutter changed, and the next hopper-load of spoil revealed that we'd pierced beyond the white stratum. Now that we were so close to the power-stone, it became urgent that we finalize the constitution of the world we intended to build. We had previously agreed most of the principles, but a few niggles remained to be resolved.

"Let's get this done, shall we?" I said, trying to ride the momentum of the newly optimistic mood.

In less than an hour, we polished off the remaining clauses. As I jotted down the final wording, my pen could barely keep up with the pace of sudden harmony. The consensus benefited from a marked absence of Ren Gessel's usual legalistic quibbles. He sat silently brooding, looking as old and worn as the ancient red sun that shone above us.

"It's ready," I announced after finishing a fair copy of our document, entitled On The Division Of Powers And The Protection Of Rights. I held it out to Ren Gessel. "We just need you to activate the geas."

"It'll have to wait," he said in a flat, tired voice. "Implementing such a complex geas takes a lot of magic, and I've barely enough power left to fuel the cutter. We might yet end up having to take pickaxes down the shaft."

My mouth suddenly tasted of ashes. "You mean all this has been a waste of time?"

"No, no." He coughed, then wheezed for breath. "I'll do it when I get the first power-stone —after I've restored my youth, and one or two other essentials."

It took all my self-control to refrain from throwing the constitution away like unwanted potato peelings. Instead I stuffed the document inside my tunic and stalked off, heedless of my place on the work rota.

Was Ren Gessel bluffing? Was his apparently fading power—the vanished house, his aged form—merely a charade aimed at convincing us he couldn't implement the geas? Without that, we had no control over what he would do when he finally reached the stone. He could set himself up as an immortal dictator with infinite power. Perhaps he had planned this all along.

What could I do? Now that we were so close, there seemed little point in sabotaging the cutter—either Ren Gessel would repair it, or the others would just hack the rest of the way down by hand.

No... if I feared Ren Gessel's power so much, there was only one way to forestall it. But such an undertaking, so fraught with hazard, would have to wait until his energy reserves were as low as they'd ever get—

right before he replenished them from the power-stone, when he was distracted by the prospect of ultimate glory.

I hated the thought of what I might have to do. But wasn't the death of one man a small price for preventing an eternity of tyranny? I checked my belt-knife for sharpness, then clasped my talisman crow and turned it over and over in my fingers.

Returning to the dig, I saw yet more purple flowers growing tall and thick on the hillside. They had even taken root in—or sprouted up through—the great drifts of dust excavated from the depths. Our path from the shaft back to camp was a carpet of trampled blooms.

The moment had come to decide whether to trust my fellow man.

"We're drawing close," said Ren Gessel over the clatter of the pit. "Now that we're so near our goal, I'd like to thank you all for your efforts so far. I know not everyone wanted to come here, and I apologize to those who arrived unwillingly. But soon you'll all be rewarded.

"Yet we must make sure our hard work doesn't go to waste. We need to be on our guard—for attack, for anyone trying to snatch the power-stone when it surfaces. Lavane, I want you to be extra-alert."

She looked hurt. "I'm always wary. If I could become more alert, I wouldn't be doing my job now." While she spoke she watched the surrounding landscape, as if a horde of demons might suddenly rise from the earth to revenge our pinprick into their domain.

Everyone crowded round, waiting for the denouement. "Maybe we should make a wider perimeter to guard the shaft," I said, wanting to reduce the number of people close to Ren Gessel.

"Good thinking," said the sorcerer. "Maffle and Frelenger, arm yourselves with crossbows and take up positions." He pointed uphill and downhill.

They left. Lavane, naturally, stayed near her master. She was tense as a bow-string, her eyes flickering as she tried to look everywhere at once. Busy keeping watch, she didn't help me unload the hopper, and Ren Gessel's arthritic arms were too weak to use a shovel. My hands grew sore and my back ached from shifting the spoil on my own.

In the rests between unloading, I agonized over what I planned to do. Doubts assailed me. Should I deprive everyone of their chance at paradise, merely because I didn't trust Ren Gessel to deliver it? I remembered how he'd said that trust bound society together. Without trust, there is no marriage, no friendship, no commerce—only fear and anarchy. Yet perhaps even that was preferable to what might happen if Ren Gessel got his hands on the power-stone....

The cutter fell silent as the hopper began to rise. "This is it," Ren Gessel said calmly.

It would take ninety seconds for the load to reach the surface. I had that long to make a decision. My left hand clutched the constitution for a new world; my right hand hovered over my belt-knife.

A sweet, cloying perfume filled the air, making me giddy with the heavy scent of—

"The flowers!" Lavane exclaimed, falling to her knees as purple blooms sprang up around our feet.

Their fragrance stupefied me, and I struggled to recollect why I stood in a heap of slag rapidly transforming into an exotic garden. Arione's face flashed into my mind, smiling in patient welcome. I only had to lie down, and I could join her. She was dead, and I was far out of time, my own death long overdue. Arione still waited for me....

With a convulsive motion I wrenched a handkerchief from my pocket and held it over my face, breathing through my mouth. It reduced the smell just enough that I could resist befuddlement. In a frenzy, I stamped on the flowers and tore off their petals.

The hopper arrived, and Ren Gessel hobbled to it. He pawed through the chunks and grit. The swiftly multiplying flowers strained to reach inside the hopper. Lavane recovered from her swoon, grabbed her blade and started scything the plants. I trod them down as I moved to Ren Gessel's side.

The moment had come to decide whether to trust my fellow man. Leaning into the hopper, Ren Gessel was completely exposed to me. Lavane was too busy slicing back the blooms to notice. I drew my knife.

Time paused like the unmoving sun.

I bent down and hacked at the miasmic flowers. Better to trust and be lost, than live a fearful wretched existence all alone at the End of Days.

Ren Gessel cried out in triumph as he grasped a small black stone. Instantly, all the purple blooms withered. Then his wrinkles began disappearing, his white hair darkening to brown. Soon he looked boyishly young, like his own great-grandson. His expression was transported with wonder. He barely seemed to see me, or any of us.

Summoning every last shred of my courage, I took from my tunic the document that contained all our dreams of a better world. Silently, I proffered it to the sorcerer.

In his eyes I saw temptation the like of which no-one had ever known before. The silent moment stretched, and broke.

Ren Gessel said, "Let us find our promised paradise."

That night—for now we had nights again—I descended the shaft once more, digging through aeons of dead souls' aetheric traces. At the bottom lay the ghosts of my own time. Uncounted shades rested here: soldiers and actresses, weavers and maidservants, all thin and faded as dust, their ghosts piled like sand-grains eroding with the tide of years.

"Arione," I whispered.

She wore no trinkets; she wore no flesh. Less substantial than my memory, her ghost rose up before me. I waited for her to speak, but she did not.

That long silence was more terrible than any words would have been.

I remembered the times I'd envisioned her in my mind's eye, discussing the nature of a world fit for both the strong and the weak. All her answers had come from my knowledge of her personality, her strength of will, her unselfish heart that loved me and loved life.

Now that vision spoke again. "My song has ended," she said. "The performance is over. You can't recapture it: no show is ever the same twice. My darling Hadro, you have spent all your life digging up the past...."

The silence fell once more, but this time it was the silence of a married couple who knew each other well enough not to need speech. I let both the ghost and the vision fade into darkness. Then I gently laid my crow talisman on the floor of the shaft, where my last dig had ended.

I wiped dust and tears from my eyes. I was tempted to lie down and rest, to join the shades in eternal peace. But I roused myself to journey back to the surface, to step out under the moon and stars, and contemplate learning to make new treasures after a lifetime spent grubbing after the old.

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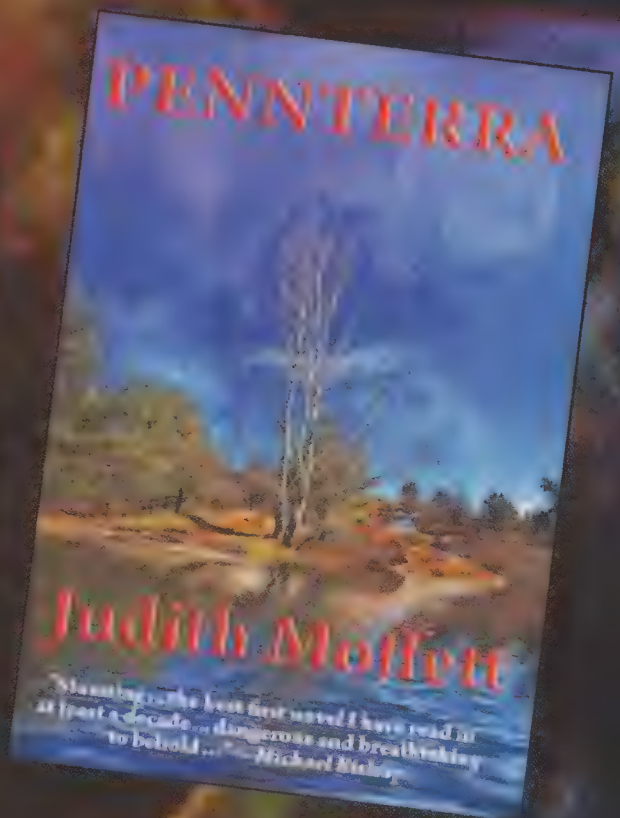


Well and Truly Broken

By Bruce Holland Rogers

Illustration by Edward Reginald Frampton

One thing about prophecies—they never come true the way you think they will.

Rose and her big sisters had been warned. "I don't want you playing in the pine forest," their mother had told them again and again. Their mother did not say why the forest was forbidden, but it was clear enough to Rose, for in winter firelight she had heard stories of the Fair Folk taking children away.

But one summer day, when their chores were done and daylight stretched on and on, the girls tired of stirring the stones in the stream and making dolls from sticks and straw. Rose saw Lily, the oldest, looking between their little house and the edge of the pines. Then Iris was doing the same, seeing if their mother or father were watching. The three sisters walked toward the forest without a word. They just went.

The black trunks rose high from the peaty earth, and walking among them was like walking between the pillars of the village church. The girls came to a grassy clearing full of flowers and butterflies, and they chased each other and made flower garlands and lay on their backs to watch the clouds. Rose felt her heart beating fast at the thought that she was where she ought not be.

Nothing bad happened. When tree shadows covered the clearing, the sisters went home and played nearer to their house until the sun went down and the western sky turned pink. The next day, chores done, they made their way to the forest clearing, again without a word.

On the third day, as they entered the shadows of the pines and glanced back toward home, they heard music. Such piping! The ringing of little bells! The sound seemed to come from the clearing, and they held hands as they tiptoed through the trees.

In the clearing was a whole tribe of girls. They wore garlands of golden snapdragon flowers and danced in a circle. Where were the musicians? The music seemed to come from all around. It was so beautiful! How the dancers leaped and laughed!

The sisters watched together, still holding hands. Rose saw that of the dancing girls, there was one without a garland on her head. Like Rose, she seemed to be the youngest.

Lily let go of Rose's hand and stepped boldly into the clearing. All at once, the music stopped. The girls who had been dancing ran up into the air, as if on unseen stairs, and they disappeared over the tops of the trees.

All but one. The dancer without a garland was left. She backed away from Lily, toward the trees at the far side of the clearing.

"Wait!" said Iris. She stepped into the clearing next to Lily.

The girl stood perfectly still. Then she said in a voice as cool and clear as well water, "Tell her to come forth!"

"Come out, Rose!" said Lily. So Rose came forward into the sunlight.

"What do you want?" the girls said.

"We want the music to play again!" said Lily.

"It won't for you."

"We want to dance!" said Iris.

"Tut," said the girl, as if to scold them. "Not for you, such a dance."

"Well," ventured Rose, "will you play with us? My name is Rose."

Lily and Iris said their names, too. The girl didn't offer hers. Instead she said only, "You can't catch me! I'm the wind!" She ran toward the sisters, seemed about to run right into Lily, then dashed away. Lily and Iris and Rose ran after her, reaching out to touch her, but the girl always darted beyond their grasp. The girl was right there, close enough for Rose to grab for her hand ... and then there was only the empty air! The girl was behind her! Rose laughed. Lily laughed, too, every time she nearly caught the girl. Iris giggled. But the girl said nothing, hardly made a sound as her bare feet struck the grass. Certainly, she never laughed.

At last the sisters collapsed on the ground, laughing, panting. Rose felt so happy, as happy as she had ever been. Oh, to be this happy forever!

The girl came to stand over them. Stars showed behind her in the purple sky. "So you like our music and our dancing," she said. "But what do you know of our life? Could you live as we live?"

"Could we?" said Lily, propping herself up on her elbows. "Could we live as you do?"

"The power of my race," said the girl, "is the power of a broken heart. She who would wear the golden garland and walk in the air must break a heart, and it must be well and truly broken!" When she had said these words, she was gone, and only then did the girls see how many stars had come out. Had they played so long?

The girls make their way through the deep darkness of the pines. Rose felt her heart beating hard again, with joy and with foreboding. What would they say when their mother and father asked where they had been?

"I'm going to do it!" said Lily. "I'm going to break a heart! I'm going to break a heart and wear the golden garland and dance in the air!"

"I am going to break a heart," said Iris. "I heard Mister Falkirk tell Father that I'd soon be doing it. I am going to break a heart so it is well and truly broken!"

"What does it mean?" asked Rose.

"When a boy wants to marry you, and you won't, then you break his heart," explained Lily.

Rose thought of the girls dancing, the golden flowers in their hair, the way they leaped, the way they ran up over the trees. "I will do it, too," she said.

"Then it's a pledge," said Lily. "We all promise never to marry!"

At that moment, they heard the worried voices of their parents calling their names in the darkness, and they hurried home. They never admitted that they had been playing in the forest, but how they were punished all the same! The next day, there was no playing for them at all, and there were chores under their mother's eye from first light to last. ❧

Michael Hague
From Hand Skills

BY KAREN HABER

Renowned artist Michael Hague has a knack for interpreting classic fantasy tales for new eras and audiences.

To Digital Thrills

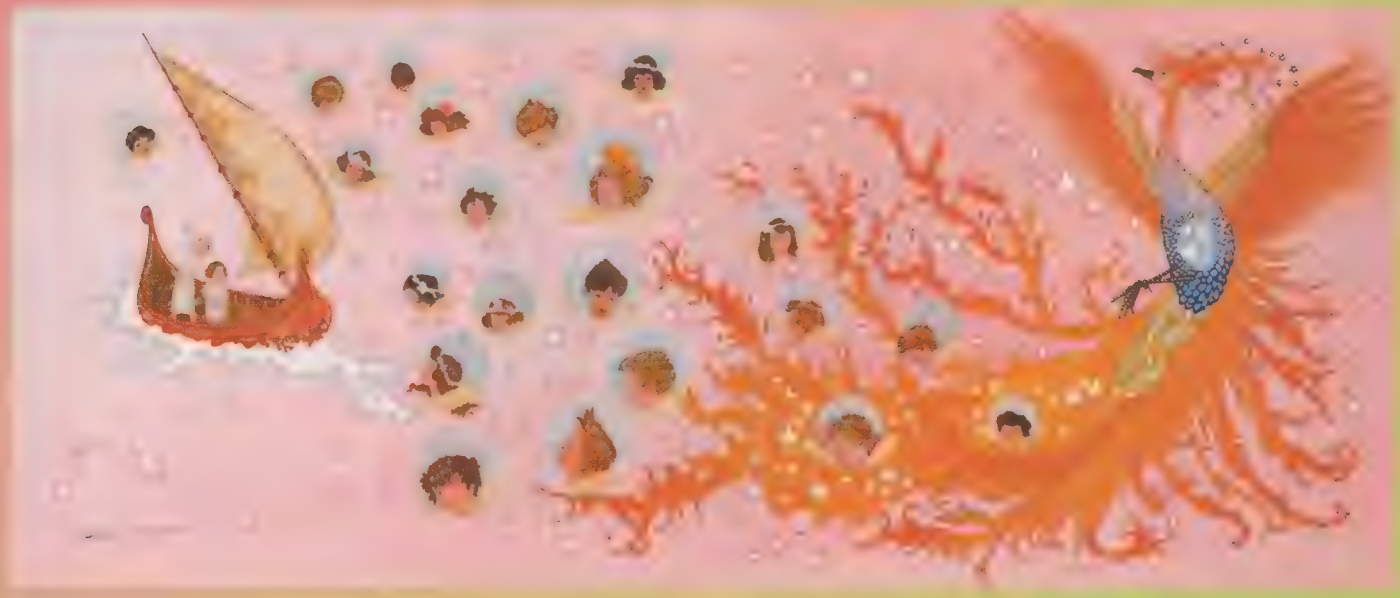
Hague's lyrical watercolors for *The Wizard of Oz*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Hobbit*, and *Peter Pan*, filled with intricate details and rich color, have delighted hordes of fans and art directors.

A graduate of the Los Angeles Art Center College of Design, Michael has spent several decades illustrating classic fantasy, best-selling children's books (with his wife, Kathleen Hague,) and contributing lively artwork to posters, greeting cards, and television series. He recently added digital art skills and writing to his resume when, with son Devon, he wrote and illustrated a graphic novel, *In the Small*.

Taking on new challenges comes naturally to Michael. Early in his career, he accepted the daunting assignment of illustrating classic fantasy tales that had artists strongly identified with them. Among these titles were *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *The Hobbit*. In a recent telephone interview, Michael acknowledged the considerable challenge of taking on an iconic fantasy work.

"That's always a difficulty," he says. "You'll never please everyone. You just have to have your own vision." One look at his illustrations for these books shows that he found a delightful way to honor tradition while bringing a fresh touch to familiar stories.

Michael discussed his approach: "I'll read the book several times and get ideas and images. Then I'll



do pages of sketches, sometimes character sketches, little thumbnails, and then enlarge from that. There are choices you must make. For example, either stylize Alice, or get a real model. There are so many decisions to make, from the very small to the very large."

In the case of *Alice in Wonderland*, he utilized a handful of artist's tricks to enliven familiar characters: composition, perspective, and color. It didn't hurt that he had a young daughter available to model as the girl who went down the rabbit hole.

Michael loved working on classic fantasies but confesses that there are a few books he'd like to do over if he had the chance. "I'd love to redo *The Hobbit*. I was so young then. It was one of those things where you wish you had more time, and vision." He adds that he'd love to illustrate a big book of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*.

He also admits to having a soft spot for certain subjects, especially dragons. "I never get tired of them. I've always loved dragons. I often feel that these guys should be the stars of the show." Michael gives them star treatment in *The Hobbit* and *The Book of Dragons*, with emphasis on realistic detail and color, bringing the viewer in close to enjoy these magical beasts.

Michael's acquaintance with fantasy stories began in childhood when, among the many tales he enjoyed were *Peter Pan* and *The Wind in the Willows*. "They were

all good friends, which made illustrating them later a real pleasure." He also remembers spending many happy hours with Andrew Lang's "Coloured" Fairy Books series (the 12-book series began with *The Blue Fairy Book*, first published in 1889). Among the artists illustrating the series were Henry J. Ford, Lancelot Speed, and G. P. Jacomb Hood. Their intricate illustrations had a big impact on young Michael.

"One of the things the Fairy books gave me was a deep interest in detail. Those illustrations were engrossing. As a kid I could go back to these pictures and always see something new in the details. And that's what I wanted to do as an artist. So now I'll put in something that's not necessarily specified by the text, maybe an hourglass or some unexpected object, that helps me define the space and, sometimes, define the character."

As a boy, Michael rarely strayed from pencil and paper. "I was one of those kids who always drew — and my parents accepted it. They weren't surprised that I went into art, they would have been surprised if I hadn't.

"Even now, I draw all the time. Even at dinner."

His own children have inherited the artistic urge and work in graphic art and the fashion industry. His son, Devon, has collaborated with his father on a graphic novel, *In The Small*, and continues to work

with his father on illustrations and book projects. His daughter Brittany served as a model for *Alice in Wonderland*, while eldest child, Meghan, posed for the Mary in *The Secret Garden*. Even Michael's magical website was a family-generated affair: http://michaelhague.com/

In addition to his childhood reading, Michael counts among his influences a wide variety of artistic styles including the Japanese printmakers Hokusai and Hiroshige, and the artists working in the Disney Studios. He admires — and collects — the work of illustrators Arthur Rackham, W. Heath Robinson, N. C. Wyeth, Howard Pyle, and Hal Foster, whose "Prince Valiant" comic strip captivated him as a child. But it all be-

gan for him with illustrated books.

"Books are what got me interested in the art field in the first place. I try to infuse my illustrations with the same spirit that the author or the story produced in my imagination. I strive to create something from an empty canvas that becomes another world that people can visit for a while and completely believe in."

How does he see himself? According to a quote from Henry Holt & Company, he's a contented daydreamer: "I count myself as one of the most fortunate of beings. (As) an artist I have not only the pleasure but the duty to daydream. It is part of my work. I have been a contented day dreamer all of my life, often to the exasperation of those around me."

At a time when many other artists are considering retirement, Michael Hague is experiencing an artistic renaissance. He credits the experience of writing and painting illustrations for his first graphic novel, *In the Small* (Little, Brown and Company) and notes that film rights or the graphic novel have just been acquired by Warner Brothers.

"I've become a devotee of digital work," Michael says. "I think it's why I'm so excited about art. I still have these old school skills but I'm putting them into the computer now."

"I've been rejuvenated. I'm still learning, almost every day. And I've already got several more ideas for graphic novels."

In addition to graphic novels, he's currently working on illustrations for the picture book *White Christmas* for HarperCollins, and for the same publisher he's just finished illustrations for *The Book of Ghosts*, a collection of ghost stories scheduled to be published soon.

Very few artists remake themselves after several decades in the trenches. Michael Hague may be unique in his fresh, enthusiastic approach to art and the digital realm.

"I'm 59," he says. "Nothing really changes. Your skills get better, but inside, you're the same. I feel like I'm back in art school, and I'm loving it."

NOGGLE STONES

by Wil Radcliffe

cover by Darrin Stephens

MANCHESTER

Burdened with an unwanted destiny...

MAGA

Haunted by a tragic past...

BUGBEAR

Driven by prophetic nightmares...

TUDMIRE

Obsessed with winning it all...

RILEY

Afraid of losing those he loves...

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One will face madness.
One will face death.
All will face the ultimate evil as two worlds hang in the balance.

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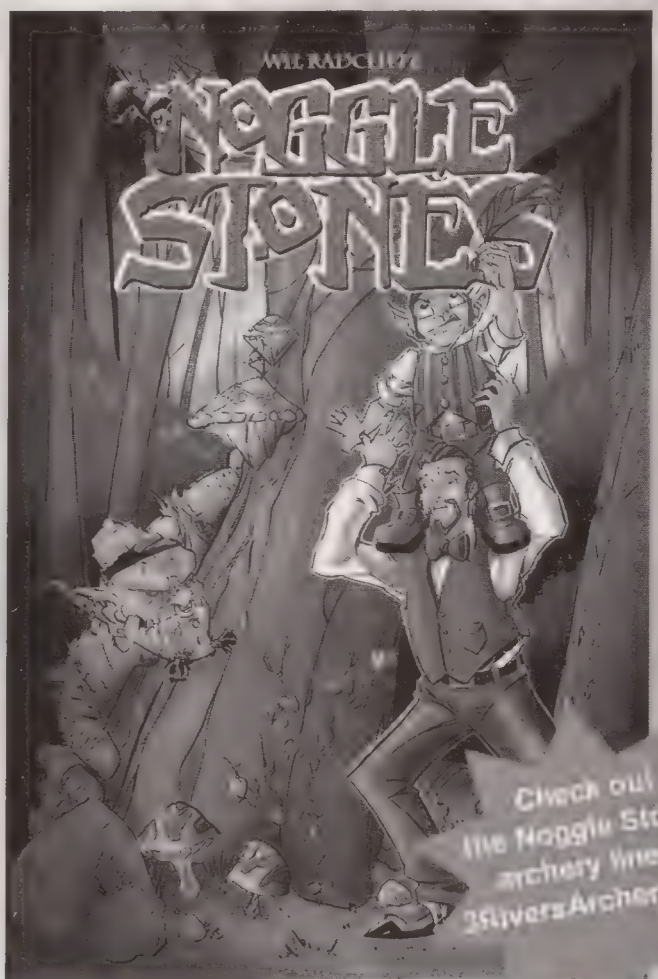
Barry Cunningham ~ the publisher who discovered J.K. Rowling



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Books

Paul Witcover
Matt Staggs

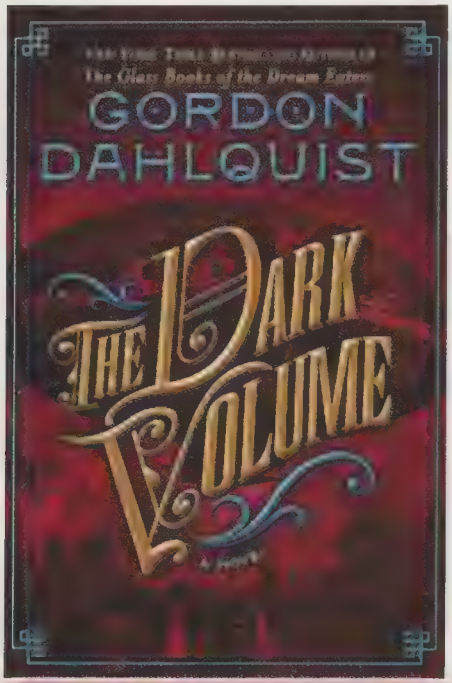
The Dark Volume is the most compulsively riveting reading experience I've had this year.

I had trouble getting into Gordon Dahlquist's first novel, *The Glass Books of the Dream Eaters*, an ambitious fantasy that was only intermittently successful in blending the ferocious narrative drive and clockwork plotting of a vintage Sherlock Holmes story, the macabre hothouse atmosphere of a gothic thriller, the naughty, S&M-tinged eroticism of a Victorian underground novel by that most prolific of authors, Anonymous, and the retro, steampunk stylings of Alan Moore's *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. This inspired formula seems so surefire that one of the reasons I persisted with *The Glass Books* was my expectation that, any page now, Dahlquist would find the proper mix to produce a fuel that would launch his novel like a rocket-powered. . . um, zeppelin. But he never quite pulled it off. Now comes the second in the series. *The Dark Volume* (Bantam, New York, hardcover, 510 pp., $26.00, ISBN: 978-0-385-34036-6), and whatever tinkering Dahlquist did in his literary laboratory has paid off big-time: the formula that eluded him throughout book one is present from the first page of book two, which picks up almost immediately where its predecessor left off. Picks up? No, this sucker blasts off and never comes down. *The Dark Volume* is the most compulsively riveting reading experience I've had this year. Its pace is so swift and headlong it's almost dizzying, and the steadily building momentum will sweep you along even as you drag your feet to linger over scenes in which the balance of erotic tension, brutal violence, and ghastly spectacle is perfectly sustained. Many readers, and I was one of them, wondered why Bantam had paid this young, first-time author a multimillion-dollar advance. Here's the answer, in spades.

Warning: some spoilers for *The Glass Books* follow. If you haven't read it, and plan on doing so before picking up *The Dark Volume*, read no further.

At the outset of this volume, which is indeed dark, Dahlquist provides a list of twenty-five points that recap in a droll and fittingly fragmentary fashion the convoluted events and relationships of, as he puts it, "what has already happened." That is, basically, this: in an alternate 19th century Europe, a naïve young heiress, Celeste Temple, freshly arrived in England from her plantation home in the West Indies, stumbles upon a depraved conspiracy involving her fiancée, Roger Bascombe. This conspiracy revolves around an alchemical process utilizing a substance called "indigo clay," which, when converted into what the author terms "a psychotropic blue glass," produces extraordinary effects upon anyone who gazes into it or even merely touches it. These effects have to do with memory: the glass books of the title are compendiums of blue glass in which people's memories are stored: these memories—often but not always sexual in nature—are sometimes willingly surrendered, sometimes taken by force. Anyone who gazes into or brushes against an empty blue-glass book is in danger of losing memories, while anyone who does the same with a charged book will not merely gain access to the memories contained there but essentially relive them as if experiencing them for the first time, with all the sensations and emotions involved. Prolonged exposure to the blue glass is poisonous to humans, but it can also preserve life . . . though at a terrible cost. Further alchemical procedures, perfected by the rich, reclusive, and decadent Comte d'Orkancz, leader of the cabal seeking to gain control of the British government, if not the world, render the blue-glass capable of creating zombies and other monstrosities possessing superhuman mental and/or physical abilities.

Underneath her pure and virginal



exterior, Celeste harbors a passionate sensuality that she both fears and longs to experience; exposure to blue-glass imbues her with the memories of the Countess di Lacquer-Sforza, a cruel and lascivious sociopath who is one of Dahlquist's most memorable creations, a capricious force of nature who ascends to the pantheon of villainesses we love to hate . . . or is that hate to love? In any case, the Countess quite literally gets under Celeste's skin, awakening her dormant sensuality and tempting her toward erotic excesses from which her sober mind and morality recoil in horror, disgust, and shame.

Partly out of self-preservation, but also because she is a genuinely good person, the plucky Celeste sets out to thwart the cabal. In this, she gains three allies. The first is Dr. Abelard Svenson, a naval surgeon assigned to nursemaid the sybaritic prince of his native Macklenburg, a European duchy of importance to the cabal. Svenson is stolid, shy, perhaps a bit slow, but strong, intelligent, and faithful; he reminded me of Nite Owl from *The Watchmen*. The second is Cardinal Chang, a deadly assassin who is neither a cardinal nor Asian, as his name would seem to imply. Chang is scarred in mind and body; if Svenson suggests Nite Owl, then Chang is Rorschach; driven by an idiosyncratic personal code others can only fall short of, he is a remorseless enemy, a dangerous friend. A third,

Young Adult Fantasy Books

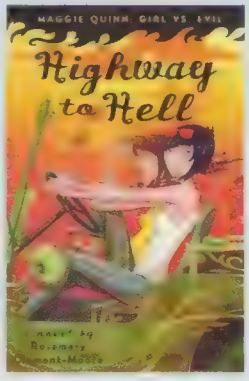
By Michael Jones

Percy Jackson and the Olympians #5: The Last Olympian, by Rick Riordan, Hyperion, May 2009

Percy Jackson, demi-god son of Poseidon, meets his destiny in the epic conclusion to this series. As the ancient monster Typhon marches across America with only the gods of Olympus to slow him down, the infamous Titan Kronos launches an all-out assault upon New York City, and it's up to Percy and his allies to stand their ground and save the day. But a prophecy is about to come true at a great cost. Heroes and monsters alike will die in the streets of Manhattan; not even the gods know how things will turn out. A nonstop adventure that takes our heroes across America, through time and space, and even into the underworld, The Last Olympian is a superb reworking of the Greek myths. With its memorable characters, widescreen action, and no-holds-barred plot, this is a worthy end to the series, sure to satisfy fans.

Beka Cooper: Bloodhound, by Tamora Pierce, Random House, April 2009

She survived her training, but as an offal Provost's Guard - a Dog - Beka Cooper is in for the greatest challenge yet. Someone is flooding the economy with counterfeit coins, an act which might very well destroy the nation of Tortall. Now Beka and her senior partner Goodwin have been sent to root out the problem at its source, in the corruption-riddled Port Caynn. But once Beka's on a case, she won't stop, whether the trail takes her into the Court of the Rogue, the homes of the local nobles, or up against the Port Caynn Dogs themselves. To survive this experience, she'll need all the help she can get from allies, both old and new, and from her own magical gifts. Once again, we're treated to a thrilling mixture of fantasy, mystery, and police procedural, as told through the voice of a fierce, unyielding, strong female lead. Bring on the next Beka Cooper adventure, and soon!



Highway To Hell, by Rosemary Clement-Moore, Delacorte Press, March 2009

All Maggie Quinn wanted to do was drive to South Padre Island with her best friend Lisa for some spring break action. One dead cow in the road later, the two are stranded in the tiny town of Dulcina, Texas, and dropped in the middle of a mystery. Something's been killing the local livestock, and all evidence points towards the mythical chupacabra as the culprit. Determined to find out the truth, Maggie and Lisa soon discover that Dulcina's in a whole mess of trouble. To save the town from destruction and defeat an ancient evil, Maggie will have to trust her instincts, her allies, and her psychic abilities more than ever. The third book in the series, Highway to Hell features the same blend of supernatural mystery, pop culture cleverness, and adventure as its predecessors, adding in a strong dash of Southwest atmosphere and lore for good measure. Once again, a solidly entertaining offering from Clement-Moore.

Soul Enchilada, by David Macinnis Gill, Greenwillow Books, April 2009

The only thing Eunice "Bug" Smoot has of value is her car, a 1958 Cadillac Biarritz that belonged to her grandfather. No wonder she's surprised when the enigmatic Mr. Beals turns up in the backseat and tells her that both it and her soul are about to be repossessed, because her grandfather defaulted on a contract. Now she has two days to outwit the devil and free herself from an infernal entanglement. Even with the help of Pesto, a cute guy who definitely knows more than he lets on, can Bug pull off the impossible? Well, she never backed down on a challenge before… Soul Enchilada is a spicy Southwestern story of cars, souls, fiendish plans, deadly challenges and affairs

Elöise Dujong, was originally the mistress of a Cabal member, and the governess of his children; due to a falling-out among conspirators, she has had a portion of her memories expunged and placed into a glass book. Whether the loss of part of her past has changed her personality remains an open question—for obvious reasons, the nature vs. nurture conundrum is a central facet of Dahlquist's dark design. Will Celeste, infected by the polluted essence of the Countess, be seduced to evil? Can Elöise, stripped of all memory of her former actions, redeem the chance she has been given to forge a new and better identity? Complicating things deliciously are the sexual cross-currents flowing between these unlikely allies, desires they can barely acknowledge, let alone act upon.

The Glass Books ended with a spectacular battle aboard a zeppelin, in which the four allies killed the leading members of the cabal, including the Comte d'Orkancz, the Countess, and Francis Xonck, the dissolute scion of a wealthy arms-manufacturing family who is nearly the equal of the Countess when it comes to treachery, casual cruelty, and spoiled self-indulgence. Our heroes themselves barely escaped alive from the resulting crash of the zeppelin in icy waters off England's inhospitable Iron Coast. Cardinal Chang was nearly killed by blue glass—saved only by Dr. Svenson's application of a strange orange substance that seemingly counteracted the virulent effects of the glass. Elöise was nearly drowned, and Celeste, even as *The Dark Volume* opens, is clinging to life, battling a potentially fatal fever.

Dahlquist tells his story in sections that overlap chronologically and are centered on the respective points of view of Svenson, Chang, and Celeste: the effect is rather like being successively exposed to the shards of three shattered glass books. Each point of view complements the others, giving readers a fuller picture of events and motivations than any of the characters come to know, and the rate at which information is provided often lags behind the pace of action and event, so that experience outstrips decidedly unexpected twists and turns, it plays against expectations, defies convention, and delivers a satisfying ending.

of the heart, as told through Bug's unique blend of stubborn sass and fierce independence. With a memorable voice and a fast-paced plot, unafraid to tackle issues of race and class, this marks a rather strong debut for the author.

Fortune's Folly, by Deva Fagan, Henry Holt and Company, April 2009

The daughter of a famous shoemaker who fell on hard times when he lost his talent, Fortunata is forced to use every inch of her cleverness to make ends meet. Unfortunately, she and her father are forced to leave home after making a deadly enemy, and they soon fall in with a band of rogues. Masquerading as a fortune teller, Fortunata is forced to weave a grand, and entirely false, prophecy for Prince Leonato of Doma. Now she has to find a way to make it come true, to save her father's life. Luckily, she's always been good at improvising. But will she follow her heart or her head when the time comes to make a choice? Featuring a feisty, resourceful heroine, Fortune's Folly is a charming fairy tale that's bound to please. The magic is subtle, the characterization rich, and the plot comfortable without being overly familiar. This is an author to watch.

The Amaranth Enchantment, by Julie Berry, Bloomsbury, March 2009

Following the death of her parents, Lucinda went to live with her aunt and uncle, working in their jewelry shop for little thanks and no pay, at the mercy of her aunt's cruel moods. That changes when the mysterious Amaranth Witch enters her life, with a dangerous proposition. As a result, Lucinda is caught up in a tangled web of intrigue, adventure, magic and deceit. Befriended by a witch, bedeviled by a teenage pickpocket, disavowed by her aunt, on the run from the law and romanced by a prince, Lucinda may just discover her true place in life. That is, if the man who killed her parents doesn't come for her first. A complex, intriguing story with some

Zombie Queen of Ashbury High, by Amanda Ashby, Speak, March 2009

Mia never should have tried to cast that love spell. But she couldn't let her nemesis, Samantha, steal her prom date. All's fair in love and war, right? Except one botched spell later, the entire school loves Mia … loves her to death, in fact, since she's turned the school body into zombies, with herself as their accidental queen. Now she has just a few days to reverse the spell before she becomes the first prom queen to act as a zombie buffet. Luckily, she has professional zombie hunter Chase, and her hypochondriac best friend Candice, to back her up. Can they set things right before this year's prom theme becomes "Braaaains?" You'll never look at high school zombies the same way again. Clever and fast-paced, this is an amusing twist on the subject matter, and an all-around enjoyable read.

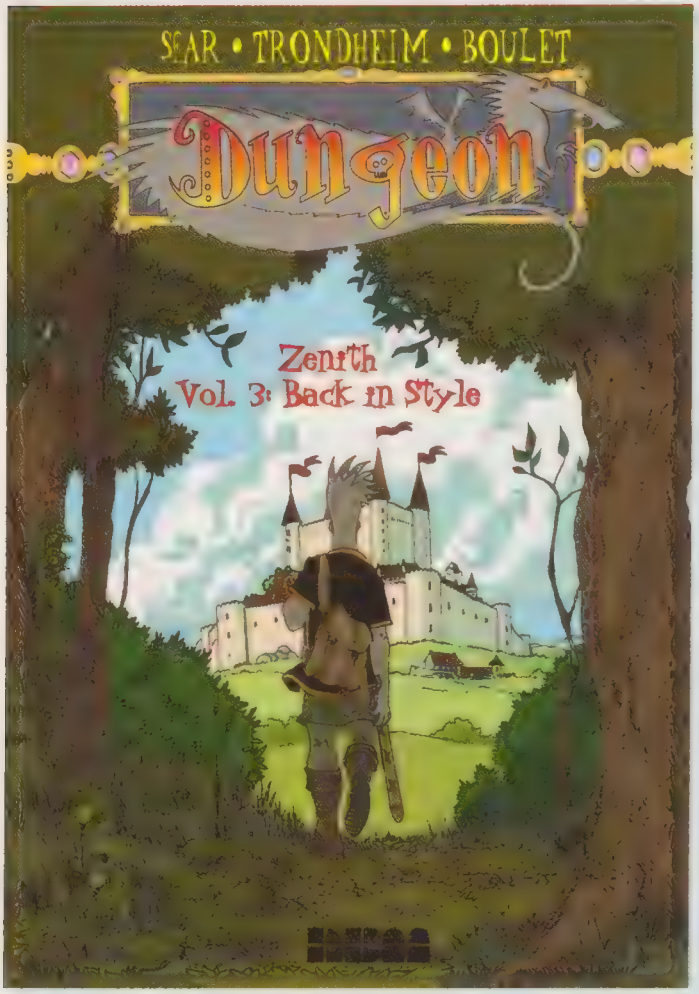
Hottie, by Jonathan Bernstein, Razorbill, April 2009

When spoiled teen princess Alison Cole falls for the bad advice of some treacherous friends and undergoes an experimental plastic surgery procedure, it backfires, secretly granting her pyrokinetic abilities. Meanwhile, her popularity mysteriously vanishes overnight, her friends desert her, and even her boyfriend abandons her. With no one but the geeky David Eels left for moral support, what's the flame-wielding girl to do but put on a costume and fight crime as the dubiously-named Hottie? Now she's L.A.'s newest darling, foiling bank robbers and even acquiring her own arch nemesis in the process. Amusing and tongue-in-cheek, Hottie is what happens when Gossip Girl meets comic books. While it has a certain charm, it's occasionally hard to take seriously, and the ending could be stronger.

understanding—but not so far that readers or characters give up hope of understanding. It's like tripping over something at the top of a dark stairway; you wonder what the hell it was, but you're too busy trying to stay upright as you stumble downstairs to take a look behind you. To stretch the metaphor, this novel is a succession of such dark staircases, down which characters and readers stumble again and again, pausing only briefly on each landing for a quick glance back.

It is from Celeste's perspective that we enter the new novel, as she regains consciousness only to find that Chang and Svenson have vanished, leaving her alone with Elöise in a small fishing

Graphic Novel Reviews
by Jeff VanderMeer



Dungeon Zenith Vol. 3: Back in Style, Joann Sfarr, Lewis Trondheim, and Boulet, Nantier-Beall-Minoustchine, New York City, trade paperback, 96 pp., $12.95, ISBN 978-1-56163-550-4.

Not familiar with the Dungeon series created by French geniuses Joann Sfar and Lewis Trondheim? Now's your chance to dive in head-first, with the latest installment, "Back in Style," part of the Dungeon Zenith storyline. Sfar and Trondheim are the kind of madmen who juggle several narratives at once, so they've also begun "Early Years," "Twilight," "Parade," and "Monstres" Dungeon series (with the last two containing episodic, minor stories). Diversifying allows the creators to work on whatever most interests them at the moment, and to develop a detailed and ever-growing back-story. In interviews, these two tricksters say they intend for the final cycle to reach more than three hundred volumes.

In "Back in Style," all the familiar faces return, from Marvin the lizard king and Herbert the duck warrior to the Dungeon Keeper and Herbert's love interest, Princess Isis. Marvin's a huge thug of a reptile with a strong sense of morality that sometimes comes to blows with, er, his tendency to want to come to blows. Herbert's part neurotic, part heroic knight, and utterly devoted to Princess Isis—a sassy cat-person with mad fighting skills. The Princess saves Herbert's foie gras about as often as he saves her cat gut.

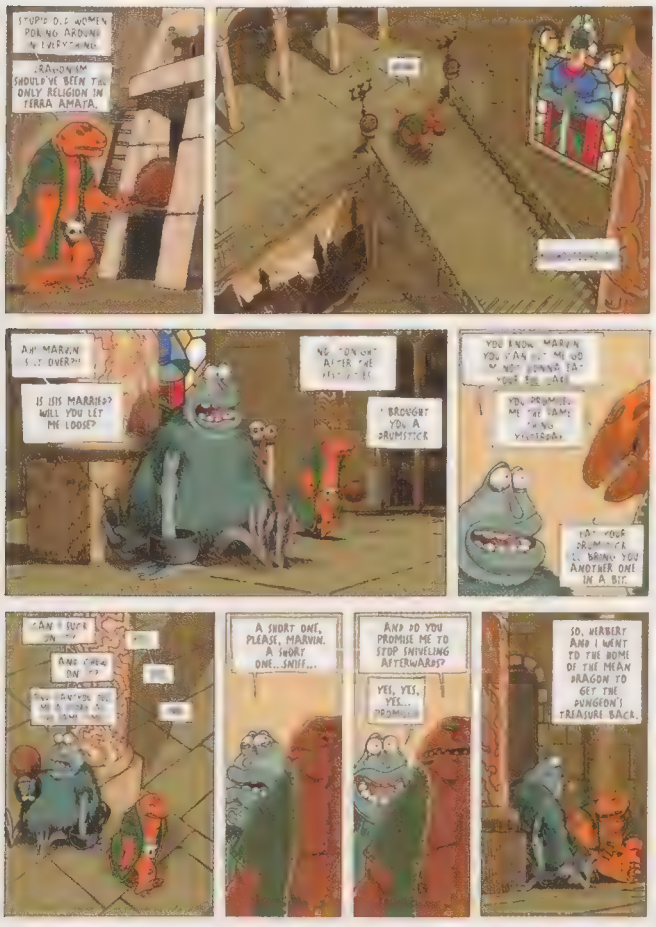
In this volume—which stands alone, unlike installments 1 and 2 in the Zenith series—Herbert's determined to stop the Princess from entering into an arranged marriage with the Keeper, while dark (duckensian) forces are attempting to take the Keeper's dungeon away from him. It's part of the appeal of the series that Sfar and Trondheim not only give readers a funny and exciting story, but also send up the whole heroic fantasy genre. Thus, between fight scenes readers get some pretty hilarious lawyerly maneuvering between the Keeper and his foes. It's a pretty safe bet that you wouldn't find this line of dialogue in a Conan story: "We, Counselor Callistus of Callistus & Callistus, declare as authentic the invoice by which Mr. Delacour became the purchaser of the so-called cloak of destiny." But, then, Dungeon has always had more in common with René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo's classic Asterix graphic novels than with stern, bad-ass barbarian conquerors. Sfar and Trondheim get a huge chuckle out of subverting the genre and paying tribute to it—sometimes in the same panel.

The pay-off in "Back in Style" comes when the Keeper and his monsters are ousted from their dungeon and must go into exile. Boulet's wonderful take on the series' high standard for guest artists is at its finest when he draws a long line of monsters dejectedly walking down a trail away from the dungeon, forced to seek their fortunes on the road. Jurisprudence having failed them, the monsters must sing for their supper.

village whose surly inhabitants are eager for them to leave. Only gradually does Celeste learn about the bloody murders that precipitated the departure of Chang and Svenson—murders the villagers ascribe to wolves but which Celeste suspects have a human source. It will surprise no one to learn that not all of those thought dead upon the dirigible in fact perished—and it is that fact which has sent Chang and Svenson scurrying separately back toward London, hoping to head-off the surviving cabal members before they can reach the seat of the Comte's power. The paths of the three focal characters intersect and diverge repeatedly as they make their way back—intersecting

Things get weirder and funnier when Herbert tries to help by entering his home town in disguise, with his duck beak inverted due to a self-imposed "mask of death" potion. Incognito, Herbert visits his father the duke, a huge bird with a mechanical arm, while in a nearby coliseum a ridiculously buff rooster trains the duke's heirs (in a particularly witty sequence) at the behest of advisors who plot to overthrow their master.

Palace guards soon try to arrest Our Heroes, along with the duke, after hours of drinking in a tavern. A bleary-eyed Marvin tries to summon flame and fire, only to throw up on his assailants instead, in one of the most outrageous scenes in the series. Will Herbert and Marvin bust out of the pokey? Will the Keeper regain his Dungeon? Maybe, maybe not, but you'll have a lot of fun following these eccentrics regardless. And, if you've read the other Dungeon books, what seems light and breezy also has weight behind it from knowing the tragic, complex past of some of the most three-dimensional characters in all of fantasy comics.


STUPID D.G. WOMEN POKING AROUND IN EVERYTHING.
RAHONIUM SHOULD'VE BEEN THE ONLY RELIGION IN TERRA AMATA.
AH! MARVIN SLEPT OVER?!
IS ISIS MARRIED? WILL YOU LET ME LOOSE?
NO, NOT AFTER THE [illegible]
I BROUGHT YOU A DRUMSTICK
YOU KNOW, MARVIN YOU CAN'T [illegible] YOU'RE TOO FAT!
YOU PROMISED ME SOME [illegible]
HAH! YOUR DRUMSTICK BROUGHT YOU ANOTHER ONE IN A BIT.
SAN'S SURE IN [illegible]
AND CREW ON [illegible]
A SHORT ONE, PLEASE, MARVIN. A SHORT ONE...SNIFF...
AND DO YOU PROMISE ME TO STOP SNIVELING AFTERWARDS?
YES, YES, YES... PROMISE!
SO, HERBERT AND I WENT TO THE HOME OF THE MEAN DRAGON TO GET THE DUNGEON'S TREASURE BACK.

Veteran and new readers alike will also experience another joy of Dungeon: spying the little details. The original French editions are oversized hardcovers, but the American publisher has chosen to release the series in smaller paperbacks. This both sharpens the background details and requires the reader to concentrate to seek them out. In one of the best examples, the monsters witnesses the court proceedings are rendered with a loose precision that will delight any fan of fantasy creatures. My favorite is a mushroom with eyes sitting in a middle row, a serious look on its face. The whole motley crew would make Hieronymus Bosch proud.

"Back in Style" marks five years and ten books of NBM Publishing supporting this epic series. In continuing to translate Dungeon into English, they're performing a public service for fantasy fans everywhere. This new installment fully lives up to the praise Dungeon has garnered from sources as various as Asimov's SF Magazine and The New York Times Book Review.

as well with three of their surviving enemies: the Countess, as desirable and deadly as ever; Francis Xonck, who has exposed himself to blue glass in a desperate attempt to save his life, only to find himself changing into a Hyde-like creature; and Mrs. Marchmoor, a woman who was subjected to one of the Comte's most horrifying experiments, as a result of which she has become a creature of living blue glass.

Unexpected betrayals and alliances are the order of the day, and two new mysteries are introduced for every old one that is cleared up. Celeste, Chang, and Svenson—Elöise, too—are compelled by circumstances, often against their will, to acknowledge unpleasant or inconvenient truths about themselves and each other. It's their fallibility and imperfections, as much as their fundamental decency, bravery, and intelligence, that make the quartet such appealing characters. Where the Countess is a caricature, albeit an immensely entertaining one, Celeste, Chang, and Svenson are flesh and blood. Almost equally complex and successful a creation is Elöise, with her missing memories and obscure motivations. Trapped between the person she was and the person she would like to be, afraid to trust her instincts and her reason, she is a figure of potentially tragic dimensions. Her peculiar affliction is mirrored in that of Celeste, who, rather than having been robbed of her identity, has had it muddled up with that of another . . . or, actually, two others, for Celeste is exposed to another blue-glass book, one even more seductive—though in a very different way—than the first.

Just as *The Glass Books* ended with a climactic set piece pitting all the characters against each other, so, too, does *The Dark Volume*. Only where the former ending was a violent muddle, this one is a shattering tour de force, worthy in every way of the novel it does not so much complete as satisfyingly complicate. I would risk exposure to blue glass this instant for an advance peek into the next installment of Dahlquist's pulp saga.

Not since Scott Lynch's *The Lies of Locke Lamora* have I enjoyed a debut novel as much as Robert V.S. Redick's rousing seafaring adventure, *The Red Wolf Conspiracy* (Del Rey, New York, hardcover, 454 pp., $26.00, ISBN: 978-0-345-50883-6), the first in the Chathrand Voyage trilogy. Indeed, Redick has a lot in common with Lynch, from his skill at assembling a highly complex and suspenseful plot that functions with the precision of clockwork yet constantly surprises, to his ability to craft memorable characters who rise above the stale genre roles they at first seem condemned to fill. Readers will also find themselves reminded at times of China Miéville's *The Scar*, as Redick's tale is also set aboard a vast floating metropolis haunted by gods, ghosts, and monsters—though not, as in that book, a rag-tag armada lashed together over centuries like some aquatic Gormenghast, but rather a single immense warship of ancient provenance and mysterious magical potency, the *Chathrand*, which boasts a crew of seven hundred.

In Redick's world of Alifros, power is divided between two great empires, Arqual and Mizthrin, whose rivalry has repeatedly erupted into full-fledged but ultimately inconclusive war. Now the emperor of Arqual has decided to pursue a course of peace with his country's traditional enemy, and the seal of that peace, like so many others in history, is to be a marriage. But the bride-to-be, Thasha Isiq, the headstrong daughter of a high-ranking Arqualian nobleman and former admiral, Eberzam Isiq, who is to become the royal ambassador to Mizthrin, finds her casual consignment to wedlock as a pawn in a larger diplomatic game intolerable. Yet she is helpless to refuse, or even to resist, when she is brought aboard the *Chathrand*, under royal guard, to be conveyed to a neutral island where the peace treaty will be signed and her marriage to a Mizthrin prince consummated.

Joining her aboard the great ship is a tarboy named Pazel Pathkendle, whose once-independent nation was conquered by the Arqualian Empire. As a member of a defeated country and a bonded servant into the bargain, Pazel is the lowest of the low, despised even by his fellow tarboys. Yet he is not without resources. As a boy, his mother, a witch, cast a spell on him, and although that spell went awry, it did gift—and curse—him with the ability to occasionally and without warning gain instant understanding of any language . . . though it also, with equal unpredictability, and for inconvenient stretches of time, renders him incapable of comprehending any language at all, including those he already knows. A highly placed benefactor, Dr. Ignus Chadfellow, who once personally saved the life of the emperor and who, for mysterious reasons perhaps involving a relationship with Pazel's mother, has taken an interest in Pazel's life, ameliorating the worst effects of his fits. Chadfellow, as it turns out, also has links to the Isiq family.

Less visible passengers aboard ship are a stowaway tribe of tiny humanoid creatures known as *ixchel*, viewed by sailors as unlucky and thus treated as

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vermin, and actual vermin—namely, rats: vicious, semisentient brutes . . . with one exception, Felthrup, a rat granted full self-awareness through the whim of a god. Felthrup is an inspired creation, a noble beast raised through no fault or virtue of his own to a level of existence that is, to put it mildly, inimical to his continued survival. He functions as comic relief at first but soon deepens to a character of genuine dignity and pathos. As for the *ixchel*, they think no more highly of humans or rats than these two species think of them, yet their diminutive queen, Diadrelu, strikes up a friendship of sorts with Pazel, whose magic allows him to understand and converse in their language, an ability no human has demonstrated before.

Thanks in part to the *ixchel*, and to the suspicions of Pazel and Thasha, evidence arises that the real mission of the *Chathrand*, sailing under the command of Nilus Rose, a notorious captain infamous for brutality, is not one of peace, but war. And somehow, the quest for an all-but-mythical artifact known as the Red Wolf plays a central part in this mission. But the truth is more complicated, for a conspiracy aboard the ship—and off it—has a very different result in mind. Battle lines are drawn, and a kind of stealthy civil war plays out on and below the capacious decks of the *Chathrand*.

Redick is not up to Lynch's standard in world-building, and there are times when details of culture and myth seem somewhat arbitrary, selected from a grab-bag of fantasy tropes and inserted as needed rather than developed logically from the raw materials of the story. But so compelling are his characters, and so gripping the twists and turns of his plot, that it's easy to forgive such minor flaws. *The Red Wolf Conspiracy* is sure to be a strong award contender in a year that has already seen a number of excellent fantasies.

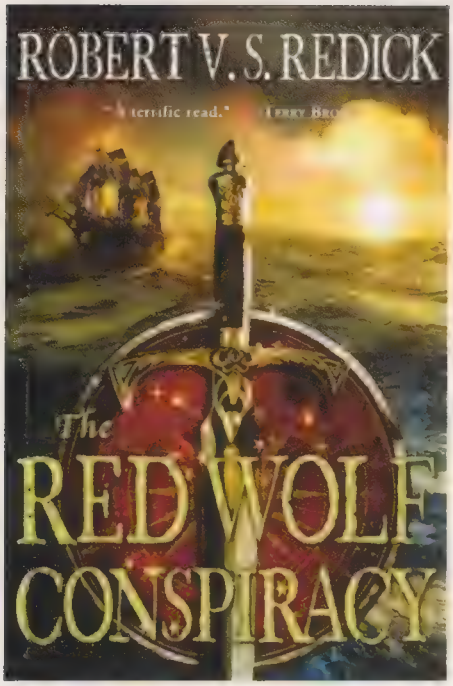
The young writer Alex Bell has followed her promising but flawed debut, *The Ninth Circle*, with a novel that is in every way superior—a major step forward. Not only is the story related in *Jasmyn* (Gollancz, London, hardcover, 304 pp. £18.99, ISBN: 0-575-08028-7) more original, but it's told with far greater assurance and technical command. There continue to be some annoying quirks of style—Bell has a curious attachment to the word "whilst," for instance—but in the main, she has moved to a new level, and a high one. Many times in reading this gripping riff on legends of the Swan Knight, myths of swan maidens, and other bits of faery lore, I was reminded of Neil Gaiman. But the mix of wonder, creepy paranoia, and disjointed dream-logic Bell brings to her tale of love, loss, revenge, and redemption is distinctively her own.

As the novel opens, Jasmyn, our narrator and main character, is newly widowed at twenty-seven, deep in mourning for her beloved husband, Liam. The two were childhood sweethearts and had only been married a short time before Liam's sudden death from a brain aneurysm. Liam's funeral is disrupted by two events. First, his older brother, Ben, from whom he had been estranged in the year preceding his death, for reasons he would never divulge to Jasymn, appears, upsetting her with his brusque, cold manner. Second, and far stranger, the corpses of three black swans plummet from the sky, crashing to earth on and around Liam's grave.

This bizarre occurrence is followed by others equally disturbing, including a visit from a man named Jaxon Thorpe, a menacing figure who claims to be an old acquaintance of Liam's and informs a frightened and angry Jasmyn that her husband was not the man she believed him to be. Another unsettling visitation occurs when Jasymn visits her parents' farm in the English countryside and takes her favorite horse, Mr. Ed, out for a ride on which horse and rider are both spooked by a magnificent black horse that appears and then vanishes with almost supernatural speed.

Ben, who had returned to Germany after the funeral, refusing all Jasmyn's attempts to make contact, now tracks her down on a visit to a friend in California, where he tells her a remarkable story. On a visit to the Bavarian castle of Neuschwanstein, Liam discovered one of those places in which the realm of faeryland bleeds into the mundane world. There he witnessed the transformation of the mythical swan maidens . . . and, according to Ben, stole something of value from them that led to his death—something that Ben is now searching for, as is the unscrupulous Jaxon. Others, too, even more dangerous, and not altogether human, are after this mysterious object, and unfortunately for Jasmyn, they all believe that she knows, whether consciously or not, where Liam hid it before he died.

Jasmyn at first thinks Ben is crazy, but continued inexplicable events soon enough compel her to join forces with her dead husband's brother—despite the fact that she is convinced, with good reason, that he is withholding the full truth from her. The suspense of the novel is generated both through the quest for the missing object and from the erotic tension generated between Jasmyn and Ben, who resembles Liam so closely that they might almost have been twins. Further adding



to the eerie, fraught atmosphere is Jasmyn's albinism, which gives her—to her own mind, at least—a freakish, otherworldly appearance; when they were just children, Liam had called her a "snow princess."

Some of the surprises that Bell strews in the path of her heroine are genuinely surprising, while others, including a key revelation, are likely to be obvious to readers long before Jasmyn figures them out. But even so, this is a deft and incisive exploration of myth and romance, distinguished by flashes of true imaginative power. It's bewildering to me that no US publisher has yet signed this talented writer, who clearly has a brilliant future ahead of her. I believe *Jasmyn* would find a receptive audience here.

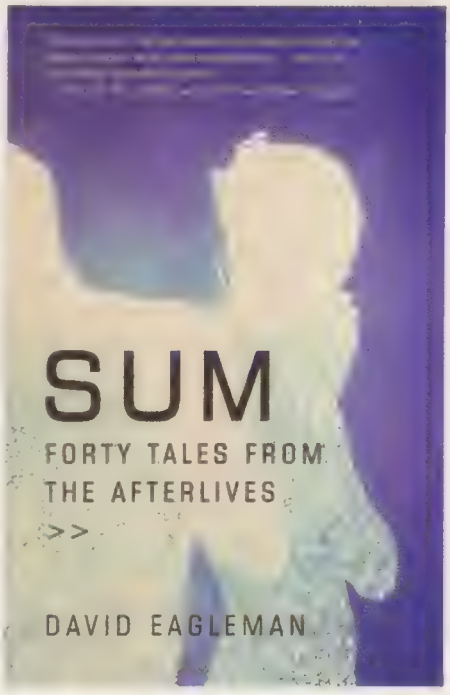
It's easy to imagine the ghost of Italo Calvino hovering with a Mona Lisa smile over neuroscientist and first-time author David Eagleman's *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives* (Pantheon, New York, hardcover, 107 pp., $20.00, ISBN: 978-0-307-37734-0), a slim collection of vignettes that casts a whimsical eye on life and what comes after. These dry, witty, occasionally poignant fables reminded me of the logically precise, wildly inventive deadpan confections Calvino spun out of scientific facts and theories in *Cosmicomics* and *T-Zero*—though, somewhat surprisingly given Eagleman's scientific background, his tales are less rooted in science than Calvino's. They also lack Calvino's zany playfulness and consummate literary artistry. Despite their fanciful elaborations, there is a sober-minded, "what-if" feel to them, as though they were generated in caffeine-fueled brainstorming sessions devoted to the production of cool riffs on the afterlife, which were then winnowed down, somewhat arbitrarily, to forty. Because the level of quality is uneven, *Sum* is a book well-suited to bedside skimming. The best of the vignettes here manage to surprise, and even to unsettle, with abrupt ironic reversals, charming existential conceits, and gently surreal details.

In "Spirals," deceased humans discover that the gods who created us are in every way our inferiors, and they look to us for the answers to the same cosmic riddles we naively expect them to answer. In "Scales," humanity is revealed to be a cancer afflicting God, a situation reversed in "Microbe." "Great Expectations" features an artificial afterlife, in which people download their personalities into a virtual environment . . . only to find themselves in a place far stranger yet also more familiar than their ersatz creation. "After the first death, there is no other," wrote Dylan Thomas, but this is not true in a number of stories here, of which my favorite is "Mirrors," a dour parable with a quietly devastating final line.

Even from this brief list, patterns are evident. Eagleman, for all his inventiveness, stays within certain structural bounds. The majority of vignettes have a kind of O. Henryesque quality; they rely for their punch on irony, reversals, devaluations. And of course, inevitably, they are really about life rather than death—but life in a cramped, philosophical sense. There are no developed characters here, only units that fill a space in whatever operational dynamic Eagleman is exploring, like the working out of a mathematical equation. That's not a weakness exactly, but it is a limitation. Many of the vignettes touch the mind, but few touch the heart. To be fair, those that do, like "Prism," in which the dead "are split into multiple selves . . . at all possible ages," are worthy of Calvino himself. Part of what made Calvino's fables so gripping was his ability to invest abstract philosophical or scientific concepts with human qualities. His enigmatic smile as he regards *Sum* from whatever afterlife is reserved for fabulists is both an acknowledgment of Eagleman's tribute and a judgment that, worthy as it may be, the tribute has not surpassed its model. —**Paul Witcover**

***Green*, Jay Lake, Tor, New York, NY, hardcover, 368 pp., $26.95, ISBN: 978-0765321855**

Sold into bondage by her father and delivered into a cloistered school thousands of miles from her home, the child who calls herself "Green" grows to womanhood under the tutelage of sadistic mistresses. Seemingly their sole pupil, she is educated in a myriad of refined pursuits including horseback riding, musicianship and more; perfection in each is rigorously enforced through regular beatings. Respite is found in the attentions of her Dancing Mistress, a sort of cat-like humanoid. Sympathetic to Green and seemingly grooming her for some unknown task, the Mistress gives her clandestine training in self-defense



and the arts of stealth. Discovering that the other mistresses plan to force her to become a consort for the city's mysterious, immortal duke, Green escapes. A fugitive, her journey takes her back to the land of her birth and into the embrace of an all-female cult of holy assassins, ultimately returning to the land of her captivity in search of answers and perhaps revenge. Jay Lake's considerable talent for world-building is at its best in *Green*, an intriguing story made that much richer by the author's inclusion of diverse human nations drawing from real-world Asian, Indian and Middle Eastern cultures for their inspiration. While largely a superior work, there is one aspect of *Green* that may keep some readers from enjoying it fully: the protagonist's sexual development isn't handled with subtlety, and at times this borders on the excessive or even seems a little lurid. Despite this mar, *Green* is a novel worth reading and a welcome addition to Lake's growing body of work.

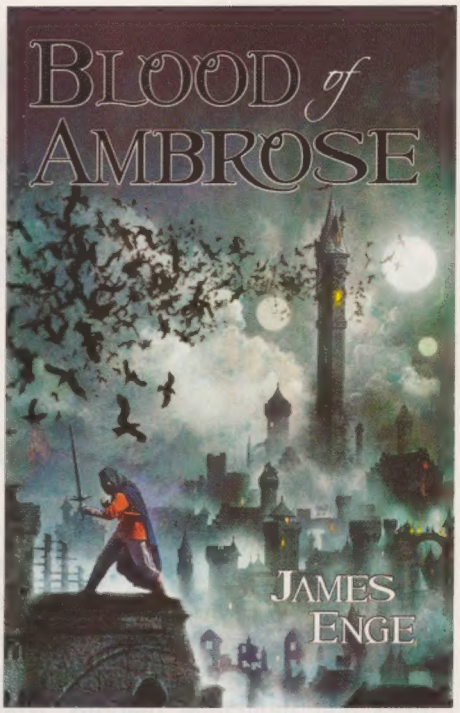
***Blood of Ambrose*, James Enge, Pyr Science Fiction and Fantasy, Amherst, NY, trade paperback, 401 pp., $15.98, ISBN: 978-1591027362**

Young King Lathmar VII stands to inherit the throne of the ancient Ontilian Empire, but must first survive the murderous designs of Urdhven, his self-appointed "protector" who will stop at nothing to eliminate Lathmar and his kin. When Urdhven accuses Lathmar's ancient yet powerful grandmother of witchcraft and sentences her to a trial by combat, she calls upon her brother, Morlock Ambrosius, to serve as her champion. A legendary swordsman, magician and embittered alcoholic, Morlock's appearance results in a series of events that plunge the city into bloody civil warfare between Urdhven's men and those still loyal to the boy king. Morlock's past adventures have been chronicled by Enge in several short stories, but knowledge of these is not necessary to enjoy Blood of Ambrose. At first blush, it could be easy to dismiss Morlock as yet another Byronic anti-hero, but readers who take a chance and get to know him will find an endearing and human hero who, despite his supernatural skills, is burdened with problems to which most readers can relate. Infused with a subtle sense of the absurd and a dry wit reminiscent of the late Fritz Lieber, *Blood of Ambrose* is highly recommended for fans of classic swords & sorcery fiction.

***Midwinter*, Matthew Sturges, Pyr Science Fiction and Fantasy, Amherst, NY, trade paperback, 345 pp., $15.98, ISBN: 978-1591027348**

Matthew Sturges is a writer perhaps best known to this publication's readers as the author of several comic book titles, including Vertigo titles *Jack of Fables* and *House of Mystery*. *Midwinter* is his first novel, and while it begins with an interesting premise weak characterization and some pacing issues prevent it from achieving its full potential.

Disgraced and imprisoned for life, Mauritane, a former captain of the Seelie Army, is offered parole and a one-time chance at redemption by completing a secret mission for his queen. Few details are shared with him - or the reader for that matter - except that it's practically a suicide mission and that the authorities will disavow any knowledge of him or his mission if he's captured. In a nod to the classic war film *The Dirty Dozen* Mauritane gathers a handful of companions from the prison and sets forth on a journey across the countryside, skirting both the Seelie Army and enemy Unseelie Army patrols the entire way. While their journey is an exciting one, Mauritane and his companions lack real definition beyond the broadest of outlines. Sometimes they even act in ways that seem in opposition to what characterization has been established. For example, at one point a particularly vain member of Mauritane's party is disfigured through a curse yet accepts his fate with borderline indifference. Even their mission is a bit of a mystery: precious little is revealed through the bulk of the book and the story's resolution tries to tie up far too many loose ends in too short a space. Readers may find themselves finishing this book and still wondering



just what happened.

***The Mystery of Grace*, Charles de Lint, Tor, New York, NY, hardcover, 227 pp., $24.95, ISBN: 978-0765317568**

While still grieving over the death of her beloved grandfather, hot rod mechanic Grace Quintero walks into an armed robbery in progress and is fatally shot. Upon her death, she finds herself trapped in a sort of limbo: a replica of her own neighborhood peopled only by those who have departed within those few short blocks over the last four decades. Unfortunately, Grace's grandfather is not among them. Most of the deceased are unhappy but resigned to their fate: whiling away the endless years playing cards, reading and learning new skills. In her explorations, Grace learns that the dead can briefly return to the land of the living twice a year, once on Halloween night and again on Walpurgisnacht. During her first trip back she meets and falls in love with John, a living man, who is shortly thereafter clued into Grace's otherworldly nature by her abrupt disappearance at sunrise. John and Grace aren't able to forget each other, and while she investigates the mystery that keeps her trapped in limbo, he works to find a way to see her again. Both newcomers and old fans alike will enjoy this sweet but not saccharine tale of life, death and the enduring power of love as only de Lint could tell it. — **Matt Staggs**.

A Time of Rebirth or Mmmmmm, Brains!

An Editorial by Shawna McCarthy

As I sit at my desk on this lovely spring day, my thoughts can't help but turn to the remarkable symbolism of this moment. A much-loved magazine died last winter, victim of changing times and tightening margins. And yet, as winter turned to spring, lo, there was a call, a call from a savior and the magazine returned to life, as healthy as in the bloom of youth and with renewed vigor and purpose.

On the other hand, welcome to Zombie *Realms of Fantasy*! We've come for your brains!

No, seriously, we want your brains. We can't do this without them. Actually we need your eyeballs and your money too, but it's the brains that bring you here and without their interest and attention, we will be forced to resume the moldering grave from which we so recently arose. In other words, if you love us as much as your Facebook and MySpace and LJ pages attest, then SUBSCRIBE!

Let's raise the stakes even further, shall we? Shortly after our recent demise there was a lot of talk on line about the death of print and the end of short genre fiction and what was to become of the field without the proving grounds that magazines like us provide. And, unlike 99% of internet chatter, these comments were right. Without the magazines providing both a training ground and a platform for young writers, the genre publishing industry will be severely hampered—writers without track records have a much harder time finding agents, and should they have sufficient talent to find an agent without a short fiction history, the agent will have a much harder time selling their books to a publisher. All that will be left in the SF and Fantasy section are Old Reliable Writers, which, don't get me wrong, have survived as long as they have because they are talented and capable, but as with all other things, they will one day pass on and who will be there to keep the industry alive? POD? Self-published books? Ebooks? Take a look around at the internet. Big place, isn't it? And absolutely anyone with a computer and a modem can call themselves a writer. So you, as readers, will find real books, good books, books that are interesting and adventurous and well written and ground breaking where, exactly?

The magazines and publishing houses act, effectively, as gatekeepers. We are your first and last line of defense against the lady down the street who's always wanted to write if only she had the time. So give us your brains—we really need them, and you need us to have them. We promise to take them lots of interesting places and nourish them well.

Thanks for being there when we needed you. ☙

Publisher's Note

By Warren Lapine

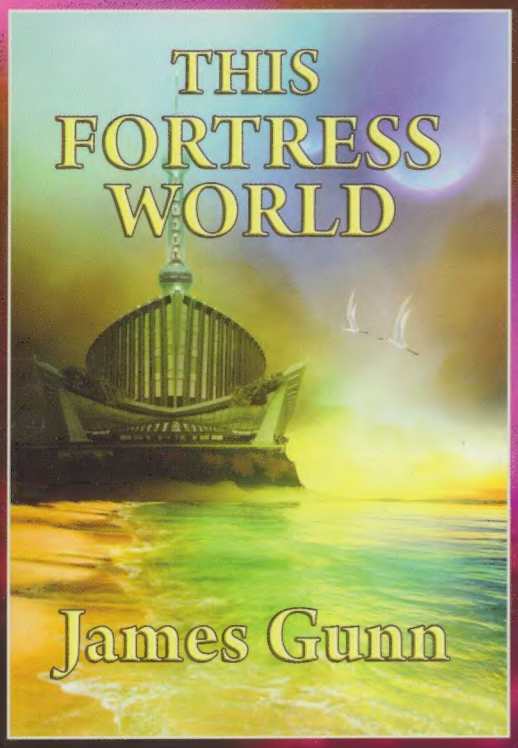
I've published a lot of magazines over the years. Four years ago I got out of the magazine business and moved to book publishing, but I missed magazines. So last year I began laying the groundwork for my new company, Tir Na Nog Press. In February I announced that I would be relaunching Fantastic Stories. A matter of days later Sovereign Media announced that it was closing *Realms of Fantasy* . Something surprising happened: the readers of *Realms* started a Facebook page and began blogging about how they wanted to save the magazine. I could see how much energy they were putting into it and realized that this was something worth being part of, so I called Sovereign Media.

Within a few weeks a deal was struck and Tir Na Nog Press owned *Realms of Fantasy*. I think it only fair that I acknowledge what a huge part the readership played in saving this magazine. Had Realms gone down without a ripple I'd have never reached out to save it. Ultimately, it was you and other readers like you that saved this proud magazine. Thank you!

Some of you've received Realms unexpectedly. You received it because you had unfulfilled subscriptions to the magazines that I used to publish—*Absolute Magnitude*, *Dreams of Decadence*, *Fantastic Stories*, and *SFC*. You'll get one copy of Realms for each issue you were owed. We're also seriously considering reviving several of those titles. If we do you'll still get the full amount of those magazines that you were owed, so ultimately you may get two issues for each one you paid for. I hope you enjoy *Realms of Fantasy*.

As for everyone else, I expect you'll love this issue as much as all those that preceded it. Once again, thank you for standing up and being counted. ☙

FANTASTIC BOOKS PRESENTS TWO FROM GRAND MASTER JAMES GUNN



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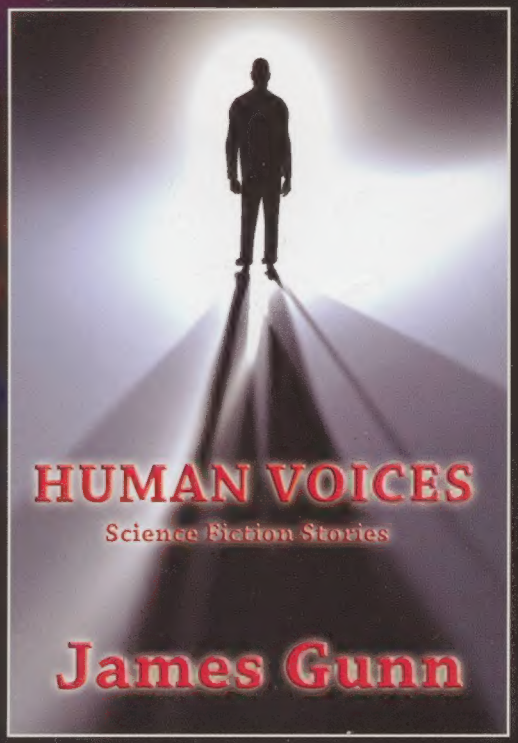

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TAMORA PIERCE

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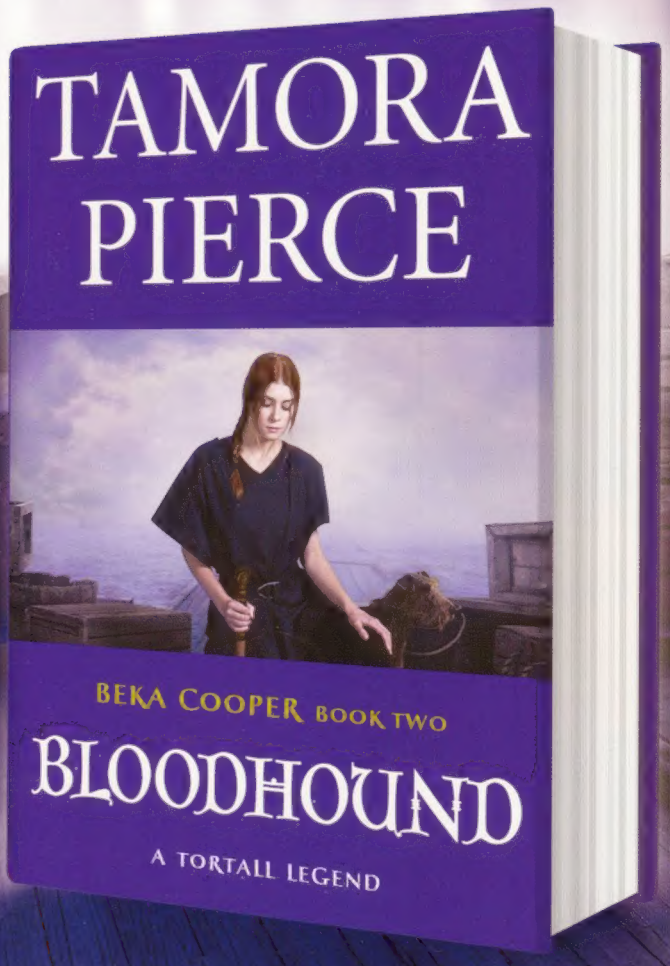

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TERRIER

Meet Beka Cooper, a rookie with the Provost's Guard. She's been assigned to the dangerous Lower City. But Beka has a gift to help her enforce the law: she hears the voices of the dead.

BLOODHOUND

Beka continues keeping the peace as a Guard in Tortall's capital. She and her companions travel to Port Caynn to track down gamblers and stop them from bringing counterfeit money into the Lower City.

DOES BEKA HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO GO FROM A TERRIER TO A BLOODHOUND?

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